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By WINCHELL HALL

*Second April Number*

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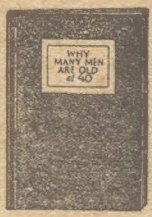


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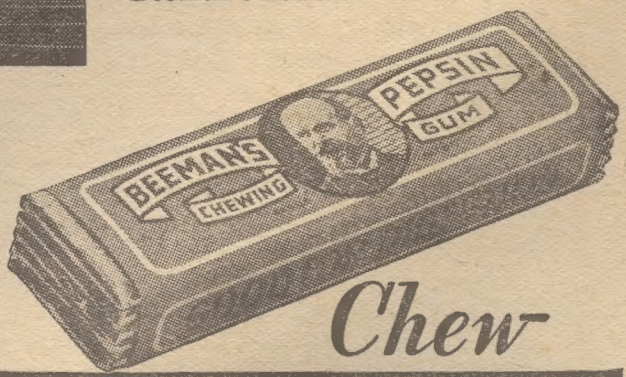


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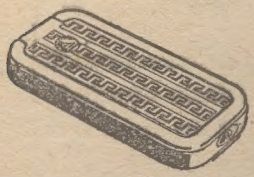

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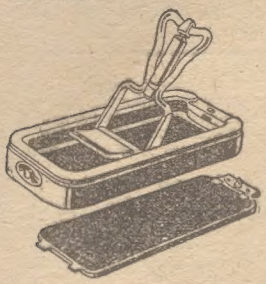

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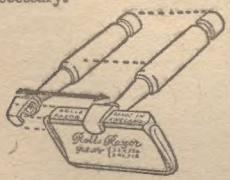

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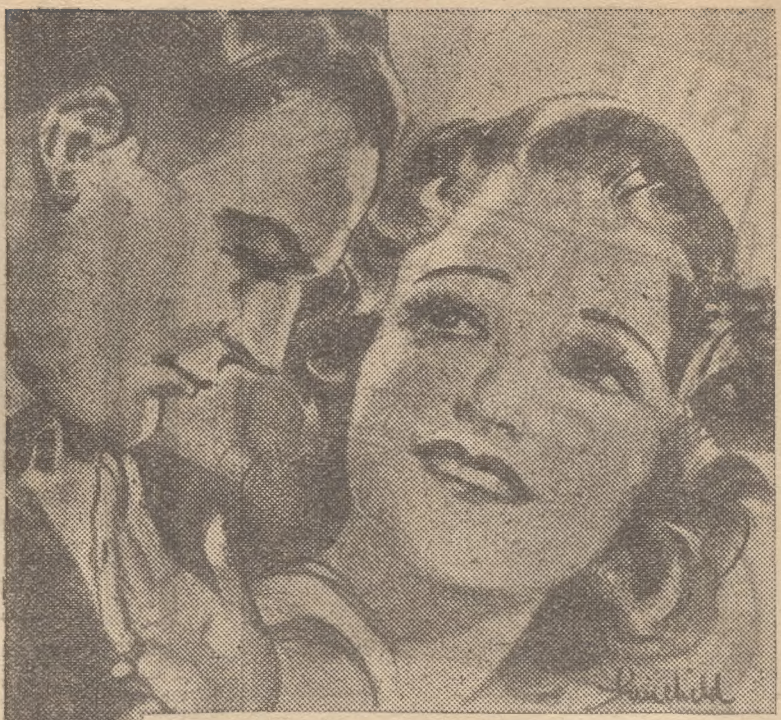

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# The River of Hate

By Winchell Hall

**The River of Hate flowed its way through the smiling rangeland and rancor seethed in the hearts of men. But because a battling cowboy had found love in the Caswell Valley country, a new day might dawn when angry passions would cease their turmoil.**

## CHAPTER I

### *Chick Makes an Enemy*

FROM where he had pulled up his pony at the edge of the trees and underbrush that crowned the crest of the hill, Chick Wilson could look almost straight down the steep incline to the level, grassy floor of the coulee. Raising a bronzed, sinewy hand to the brim of his sombrero, he shaded his eyes, leaning forward in his saddle the better to observe the slender young girl in trim and becoming riding kit, who was putting a spirited pinto through its paces on the open, park-like space at the foot of the slope.

"Jumpin' Judas! Look at her go, Timmy!" he murmured in wholehearted admiration. "I'll bet yuh a bale of the sweetest hay in Texas that there ain't another girl in the state can ride thataway!

"Now, just yuh take it easy," he advised, as the intelligent little cow-

pony stamped an impatient forefoot, plainly resentful of the passive rôle of onlooker and eager to take an active part in the fun. "We ain't been invited to the party, an' we'd only spoil it if we tried to crash the gate. Likely she'd quit an' go home if she knowed anybody could see her, an' this is a regular grandstand seat."

Chick had been lolling back against the cantle of his saddle, indolently surveying the rugged beauty of the Caswell Valley when the girl had appeared, riding out of the east. Instantly the lazy indifference had vanished from his manner and he now sat up smartly, alert and interested.

He was a handsome young puncher; lean, wiry, tough as a piece of seasoned hickory, without an extra ounce of flesh on his compactly knit frame. His light-colored Stetson set off his dark hair and deep, thoughtful brown eyes to advantage. He had a straight nose, a rather wide, generous mouth and a square-cut jaw that bespoke firmness and determination—perhaps even hinted at stubbornness.

As he watched her, the girl took off her sombrero and tossed it to the ground beside a swaying tuft of tall grass. Fifty yards up the valley she wheeled her pony and dashed back at full speed. As she neared the grass tuft, she leaned far out of her saddle and, with a graceful swoop of her right arm, caught up the sombrero, righting herself with an effortless ease that was a delight to see.

Then, apparently satisfied with the result of her morning's practice, she slowed the pinto down to a walk; only at sight of a horseman riding toward her out of the timber on the farther side of the coulee, to wheel again and canter off briskly in the opposite direction.

The horseman, however, failed to take the obvious hint. He put spurs to his own mount and soon overtook her. For a short distance the pair rode side by side, and although Chick could hear not a word that passed between them, it was plain that the man was alternately pleading and arguing, and that the girl was listening with reluctant distaste.

"Seems to me like he'd ought to get wise that there ain't no 'Welcome' sign on the mat, huh, Timmy?" Chick suggested, meditatively rolling a brown paper cigarette. "But some folks isn't very observant, an'— Why the low-down, dirty polecat! Come on, Tim—let's go!"

In the gallop down the steep slope of the hillside, Timmy slipped and slid and scraped his hocks, but he kept his footing and Chick rode him with the skill of one bred to the saddle.

Their descent was far from noiseless, but neither of the two in the coulee seemed to be aware that anyone was near. The man had suddenly seized the pinto's bridle and brought both horses to a stop.

"Come now, Betty, don't pull that fool touch-me-not stuff," he growled resentfully. "I just want to talk to yuh a minute."

"You ought to know by this time that I haven't the slightest desire to listen to anything you have to say," she told him coldly, "and I don't intend to."

"No? Well, yuh might change yore mind; other gals has. Yuh know I'm plumb loco about yuh—always have been. Why won't yuh come off yore high heels an' be a mite soci'ble, huh?"

"You have your nerve to ask me that!" she flashed. "Take your hand off my reins!"

"Aw, cut it out, kid! It won't hurt yuh to be nice to me." He leaned over and put an arm around her shoulder.

"None of that, Morton!" The girl attempted to twist from his embrace, but Morton held her the more firmly and tried to turn her lips up to his own.

A hot flush overspread Betty Parsons' face; a glint that was compounded of anger and repulsion came into her blue eyes as she struggled to get free.

Morton, however, was too strong for her, and in sudden desperation she jerked back, digging her spurs into her pony's flanks.

The startled animal darted forward so quickly that the girl was unseated. Morton made no effort to keep his own saddle. He slid to the ground with his arm still clamped around Betty's shoulders. She struck at him fiercely with her clenched fist.

"Let me go!" she panted furiously. "Let me go, I say!"

"I ain't goin' to hurt yuh none, Betty, honest. Just one little kiss, that's all, an' then I'll let yuh up. Aw, be a sport an' quit squirmin', will yuh?"

Wilson, riding like the wind, was racing across the floor of the coulee. Ten feet from the struggling pair he leaped from the saddle, catapulted through the air and landed squarely on Morton's back. Before the man knew what it was that had struck him, Chick had yanked him away from the girl and hurled him aside.

Morton, however, was no mean antagonist. He weighed over two hundred pounds and he was as strong as a bull. He was on his feet in an instant and in another, the battle started in earnest.

Over and over the two men rolled, driving home hard, punishing blows, striking and tearing at each other like two savage animals, neither getting much advantage. If Morton was heavier and more powerful, Chick Wilson's cat-like quickness almost balanced the odds.

"Give it to him, cowboy!" the girl encouraged her unexpected champion. "Bully for you!"

Chick managed to free an arm, and, swinging his right fist in a short, swift arc, he caught Morton flush on the jaw. The big man's knees buckled; he swayed, eyes half closed, and then slumped to the ground inertly.

Chick, breathing hard, lurched to his feet.

"Well, that's that," he grinned at the girl. "I kinda reckon he won't be botherin' yuh for the time bein', anyways."

"I reckon not," she agreed, with a glance at Mike Morton's sprawled and motionless figure. "I certainly am a whole lot obliged to you. You've done me a mighty big service, Mister—"

"Wilson's the name, ma'am—Chick Wilson. An' I didn't do nothin' that any white man wouldn't have done. I was up yonder on the top of the hill when I saw this varmint make a pass at yuh, so I allowed it might be a good thing for me to draw cards."

"I'm certainly glad you did, Mr. Wilson. I—" She broke off with a sharp cry of warning, and with all her strength, thrust Chick to one side. Simultaneously, there was a jet of orange flame, the roar of a forty-five and a bullet grazed Chick's temple, scorching his flesh with the hot wind of its passing.

The cowboy whirled like a flash, jerking a gun from its holster as he did so. Before Morton could pull trigger a second time a shot from the gun in Wilson's hand drilled him through the forearm, sending his own weapon spinning from his grasp.

Chick, his eyes blazing with anger, strode over to the would-be assassin.

"Git up an' git!" he grated. "I reckon I ought to have finished yuh on the spot! Gawd knows if any sneakin' coyote ever had it comin' to him, yuh have!"

Painfully, Morton clambered to his feet.

"I don't know yuh, stranger," he snarled, "but I reckon I'll make it my business to get better acquainted with yuh if yo're aimin' to stay in these parts!"

"Mebbe I am, an' mebbe I ain't; but yo're movin' right now. Sabe? Start!"

Morton made a half-hearted attempt to brush the dust and grime from his clothing and stumbled over to his

horse. With considerable effort and much muttered profanity he climbed into his saddle.

Chick picked up the gun he had dropped, ejected the cartridges from the cylinder and held it out to the big man, who snatched it rudely out of his hand.

"Think yo're smart as hell, don't yuh, huh? Well, my turn'll be comin' hombre, an' don't yuh forget it!" He gave Betty Parsons a vicious glare, wheeled his horse and spurred rapidly down the bottom of the coulee.

"Got a sweet disposition, ain't he?" Chick observed with a grin, turning back to Betty, whose eyes widened in quick dismay as she saw the thin red stream that was trickling down his cheek and dripping onto the torn sleeve of his gray flannel shirt.

"Why, you're wounded! You're bleeding—"

"Nothin' but a crease, ma'am. A little water'll set me all to rights. Any hereabouts?"

"There's a spring over beyond that clump of trees." Betty indicated a nearby clump of cottonwoods and led the way toward it.

"Sit down here on this stone," she commanded, as they reached the little pool of clear mountain water sparkling in the morning sunlight. "Don't argue, please; just sit quiet and let me attend to this."

"All right, ma'am, just as yuh say," Chick returned meekly. He was a little dizzy and shaken despite his confident assertion; and he was not sorry to sit down on the flat-surfaced boulder while with skilful fingers she washed the blood from the deep scratch across his temple. Then, improvising a bandage from her neckerchief, she bound it around his head.

"If you're expecting to be around this part of the country, I hope you'll steer clear of Morton hereafter," she said seriously, as she handed him a leaf-cup filled with water and seated herself beside him. "He's the most powerful man in the county, and about the wealthiest—as well as the best hated.

"He's been buying up all the land he can get, or just grabbing it, although nobody's been able to find out what he wanted it for. He's squeezed out most of the small ranchers hereabouts, and the others are afraid of him, with good reason."

"Yuh had trouble with him before this?" Chick asked.

Betty hesitated, shrugged one slim shoulder.

"Well, you see he says he's in love with me."

"Darned funny way he takes of showin' it," Chick drawled.

She laughed, a roguish dimple showing in her cheek.

"Anyway, that's what he claims. But he'd like to get his hands on my dad's ranch. He can't buy it, so he's trying to marry it."

"Which, I take it, yuh ain't exactly hankerin' for him to do."

Her small brown hands clenched into fists.

"I detest him!" she said in a low, fierce little voice. "I always have. This morning is the first time that he's ever tried to touch me; but he's too bold, too sure of himself. And I don't know why, but somehow I have a feeling that there's something—well, sinister about him. Something in his eyes—"

Chick nodded.

"Yeah. I noticed he was sorta snake-eyed; an' it's been my experience that them kind of mavericks'll bear watchin'. I wouldn't 've been inclined to trust him any farther than I could throw that hill, even if he hadn't been kind enough to drop me a word o' warnin'. If I stick around these parts, I'll keep my guns where they won't be hard to reach!"

"You are not riding for any spread just now?"

"No, ma'am. I got tired punchin' cows up in Montana, an' I figured I might ride down around the silver mines in Old Mexico. I was there

once before an' I did pretty well. But I ain't really made up my mind yet."

"Well, anyway," Betty declared, "you must stay with us for a day or two until you decide what you *are* going to do. Dad'll sure want to shake hands with the hombre who manhandled Mike Morton. We're only about two miles from the ranch house. The Lazy Y is our outfit. Maybe you've heard of it?" There was a note of pardonable pride in her voice as she mentioned the Lazy Y, considered one of the finest small ranches in the whole State of Texas. "We'll all be delighted to have you. Will you come?"

Chick stood up.

"Ma'am," said he, "will a duck swim? The answer is yes, an' thank yuh!"

## CHAPTER II

### *The New Foreman*

IT was nearly dinner time when they arrived at the Lazy Y. As they rode into the yard, Wilson was decidedly impressed with the establishment. Everything from the trim, white ranch house to the wagon shed and the horse corral seemed as spick and span as a Dutch housewife's kitchen.

He commented upon it to Frisco Willy, one of the hands to whom Betty introduced him while she went in search of her father. Willy was short, very bowlegged, and very freckle-faced. He wore an enormous black Stetson, a gayly striped shirt set off by a bright, blue silk bandanna, and gray trousers with big checks. Crossed gunbelts, from each of which swung a holster containing a business-like Colt forty-five, were fastened about his waist. He and Chick took to each other immediately.

"Yeah," nodded Willy, "the Old Man is a reg'lar heller for havin' things kept nice. The Chink spends all his spare time—of which he ain't got a lot—cleanin' an' scrubbin' an' polishin' up. Any time a feller leaves anythin' kickin' around, he gets bawled out proper.

"The Old Man says he knows he ain't got the biggest ranch in the state, but he aims to have the best one, an' I'm a wall-eyed longhorn if he ain't. Take our beef critters, for instance; a finer, fatter bunch of cattle yuh never seen. *They* ain't no range cows, all ribs an' horns. They're real beefers if there ever was any. Green grass an' shade, an' plenty of good water is what does it."

He jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

"Here comes the Old Man now," he said.

The owner of the Lazy Y was a fine-looking man, past middle age, with clear-cut, almost classical features. He was dressed in a drab brown shirt, open at the throat, trousers of a nondescript material held up by old-fashioned suspenders, and black calf riding boots. He wore no chaps and no gun, for he had just come from the house.

As he drew closer, Chick could see that his face was rather gaunt, and he wasn't carrying enough weight for his height. He wasn't exactly thin, but he was close to it.

"Howdy, Wilson," he said, extending a big, cordial hand. "I'm plumb grateful to yuh for what yuh did for my daughter, an' I want yuh to feel right at home."

Chick dismounted and shook hands.

"Thank yuh, sir. I'm right glad to be here. Yuh sure have a dandy outfit."

The Old Man grinned and spat at a pear cactus.

"We kinda like it," he said. "Come on in an' wash up. Willy'll take care of yore war-sacks. Dinner's about ready, an' Betty gives us all a call-down if we're late to meals. She runs the inside of the establishment just about as she pleases, an' since I've been feelin' so poorly, she's kept an eye on things outside as well."

They walked up to the house. Wilson decided that he liked the ranch about as well as any that he had seen since checking out of the old place back in Montana, and Betty's appearance on the veranda didn't exactly cause him to change his mind. She had changed into a blue gingham dress which showed off her slim young figure to advantage, and formed a colorful contrast to her light bobbed hair.

"How is your head?" she asked.

"Better, thank yuh. That cold water yuh put on it did the trick. I'm sure glad yuh shoved me when yuh did. Elsewise I'd have been buzzard bait by now. That jasper hasn't been around here, I take it?"

"Not yet," she replied, "but he will be, all right. Now that it's come to an open quarrel, I'm afraid we're going to have plenty of trouble with him. Well, dinner's about on the table. Dad'll show you where you can wash up. And hurry, both of you. I've a pan of hot biscuits just about ready."

Due to the fact that there were only six hands on the ranch, the family and the cowboys had their meals together. A long table was set in the combination dining room and kitchen, Old Man Parsons at one end of it and Betty at the other. The men sat three on a side.

Chick Wilson had the place of honor at Betty's right, and directly opposite him was Frisco Willy. Slim Hartman, beside Willy, would never have taken a prize in a beauty show, but he had a smile that made people love him. Next to Hartman was Red Roberts, a blue-eyed, fiery-haired youngster who didn't know the meaning of the word fear.

Buck Jordan sat at Chick's right. He was a slow, dull-witted puncher, but faithful as a Saint Bernard. Next to him was Patsy Clark—raw-boned, red-faced, with a wide mouth that was usually open in a grin. And between Clark and Old Man Parsons was Soapy Dixon, a little runt, smaller even than Frisco Willy, but supposed to be quite a wizard with a gun.

Between mouthfuls of food, they joshed with one another or with Betty or Old Man Parsons. It was more like one big, happy family than anything else. The Old Man treated the punchers as if they were his sons, and they, in turn, were devoted to him and to his daughter.

After the meal, Parsons announced that he wanted to talk to Chick. He led the way out onto the front porch and waved him to a chair.

"I'm kind of up against it, Wilson," the rancher began. "Yuh see, my insides have been goin' bad on me for years, an' I ain't able to run things the way I'd ought to. Not that the boys ain't loyal; but they're easy-goin' an' full of hell, an' there ain't one of 'em I can make over into a foreman. It just ain't in 'em, that's all.

"An' now Mike Morton's hoverin' around like a buzzard sittin' on a slaughter house fence! I want to go East in the fall an' give some of them high-toned specialists a chance to look me over; but unless I can find somebody an' work him in as straw boss this summer, I don't see how I'm going to be able to get away."

"That's kinda tough, Mr. Parsons," Chick sympathized. "Ain't there no first class cowpoke hereabouts that yuh can get to take things over while yo're away?"

"Nope. All the good ones have outfits of their own to look after. I need someone who has guts, an' plenty of 'em, an' who won't cut an' run if the goin' gets tough, which it likely will." The Old Man paused for a moment and looked Chick Wilson squarely in the eyes. "Boy, how would yuh like the job? I can only offer yuh a hundred a month, but I'd sure like to have yuh. I don't know nothin' about yuh, son; but what yuh've done today talks plenty to me."

Chick Wilson puffed his cigarette in silence. The Lazy Y had, curiously, become very important to him for

some reason or other—much more important than his vague project in Mexico. He could hear Betty humming a tune as she moved about indoors. He didn't recognize it, but he suspected that it was a love song. Silver mining, already rather dim, faded out of the picture entirely.

"Thanks a heap, Mr. Parsons," he said at last. "I'm takin' the job."

"Fine!" The Old Man raised his voice. "Hi, Betty, come here an' meet the new foreman I've just signed on!"

But when the girl appeared in the doorway, the obviously genuine pleasure she showed at the news was rather belied by the little troubled frown on her charming face.

"I think we're mighty lucky, Dad," she said, "but you know we're headed for trouble with Mike Morton. Is it quite fair to Mr. Wilson to involve him any deeper in our quarrel?"

Chick snorted indignantly.

"Miss Betty, if yuh was a little smaller, I'd admire to spank yuh for that crack!" he declared. "Fair to me? Why not? I ain't signin' on as a gunman, am I? Of course, if durin' my round of duty it becomes necessary for me to indulge in a little free an' fancy shootin'—well, that ain't no skin off nobody's shins, is it, Mr. Parsons?"

"Not a bit," Parsons chuckled; "not a bit."

"Well, from what Miss Betty an' yuh have been tellin' me, along with what I've seen for myself, it sorta seems to me as if this here Morton feller has the idea that he's the head-nigger in these parts. Mebbe we can show him he's mistaken. Anyway, if he starts a ruckus, I'll sure enjoy tryin' to make him see the light."

"But what about your silver diggings in Mexico, Mr. Wilson?" Betty asked him, with just a ghost of a smile playing around the corners of her mouth.

"Miss Betty, there's some things in this world might just happen to be more important than silver mines," he replied, with mock solemnity. Then he added, with a twinkle, "An' now, seein' I'm one of the hired help, I reckon yuh'd best call me Chick!"

## CHAPTER III

### *Morton and Wilson Tangle*

IN the good old days when honest beer could be had for five cents per schooner, Dutch Schmidt, bartender in the Silver Spur Saloon, had made a considerable sum of money, and developed a decided paunch.

This last was still with him, but the cash had vanished when Schmidt, his head filled with golden dreams, had discovered that the tract of "proven oil land" which he had bought from the glib salesman in a Chicago real estate office, was really nothing but a section of badlands through which the Caswell River had cut a steep, narrow channel.

For days, he had hung around River Junction in a drunken haze. Pat Conners, then barkeep of the Silver Spur, had been hurried into an untimely grave by a wall-eyed Mexican on a shooting spree, and Dutch, down to his last fifty dollars, took back his former job.

He handled plenty of money, but somehow little of it had stuck; and the only thing he owned, aside from a few personal effects, was his land, which River Junction referred to as "The Great Camel Field." Year after year, he paid taxes on it, and hoped for a buyer.

He was polishing glasses at the bar of the Silver Spur when the swinging doors parted and Mike Morton came in. It was mid-afternoon, and, save for a couple of punchers sharing a bottle in a far corner of the room, the Silver Spur was deserted.

"A shot of redeye to cut the dust, old-timer," Morton said, tossing a silver dollar on the bar. "Never mind the change, buy yoreself a cigar."

"Thanks, Mike." Dutch poured a generous drink.

"Found any sucker for yore land?" Morton chuckled.

"Not yet, Mike; but I will."

"How much yuh holdin' it for?" Morton tried to make his tone sound casual; but Schmidt was no one's fool, and he sensed that something more than idle curiosity had prompted the question.

"With the original investment, an' the interest an' taxes for ten years, I've got about twenty thousand dollars in it," he said. "Yeah, I reckon that would pull me out about even. What's doin'? Do yuh know anyone who wants to buy?"

Morton laughed.

"Twenty thousand dollars in yore hat! Why, that land ain't worth two thousand, an' yuh know it."

"Perhaps it ain't to most people, but it's worth a heap more than that to me. Some day I'll land the right guy an' get my price for it."

"Yeah, an' some day I'll walk across the Gulf of Mexico. Smoke another pipeful of that hop, Dutch, an' yuh'll be the Girl of the Golden West!"

"Well," Schmidt said craftily, "a month ago I'd 've agreed yuh was right, Mike; but since then somethin' seems to be stirrin' along the river. Yuh ain't the first gent that's been pussy-footin' round tryin' to get a price on my land. I ain't had a chance to ride out there lately, but all of a sudden the old Camel Tract seems to have become mighty interestin'."

"Has Old Man Parsons been after it?" Morton demanded incautiously.

So that was the way the wind was blowing! Schmidt's face was inscrutable as he said:

"Well, mebbe he has, an' then again, mebbe he ain't. Why don't yuh ask him? Yuh an' him has always been pretty good friends, ain't yuh?"

"Yeah. That is, we have until lately. But since he signed on his new foreman we ain't been pullin' quite so well. The fact is, that Wilson is too dang loose with his mouth an' somebody'd ought to close it up for him. I'm kind o' figurin' on doin' it myself."

Morton, glass uptilted, failed to observe the bartender's hasty signal, and went on to express his opinion of Chick Wilson, while Schmidt, fascinated by what he expected would occur, could only listen in pop-eyed anticipation.

"Yes, sir, I'm goin' to run him out of the county right sudden. He rides like an' old woman, dresses like a movin' picture dude, an' he ain't got no more guts than a scairt jackrabbit."

"Oh, yeah?" came a lazy drawl from the doorway. "An' what backs up these statements?"

Dutch Schmidt ducked as Morton whirled around and faced Chick, who was leaning nonchalantly against the bar. He had entered the saloon just as the Box H man was starting his tirade, and had let him finish it without interruption.

"Why, yuh low-down—" Morton began.

"Better not say it, Mister." There was a dangerous gleam in Wilson's eyes and Morton decided that the advice was sound. "The fact is," Chick continued, "yuh've been runnin' off at the mouth too much for yore own good. I've been hearin' some of the remarks yuh've been makin' about me, so when I seen yore chunk of crowbait standin' at the hitch-rack, I reckoned I'd come in an' have a little chat with yuh."

"Yeah?"

"*Yeah!* I knowed when yuh realized what a mess of trouble yore chin music was leadin' up to, yuh'd be glad to do the right thing about it. Rather than run the chance of anybody misunderstandin', I figured mebbe yuh'd better square things by makin' a public announcement that yuh was mistook, and wanted to apologize."

"Yeah?" said Morton again. "Well, who is hell's goin' to make me, huh?"

Chick laughed.

"Don't be foolish, Morton. There

ain't no one goin' to *make* yuh do it."

"Yo're damn right there ain't!" Morton blustered.

"Course not," Chick pursued smoothly. "There ain't a man in the world can make yuh apologize if yuh don't want to, but I kinda have a feelin' that yuh'll be wantin' to."

"Is that so?"

"I wouldn't fool yuh, Morton. I reckoned yuh might have a little trouble makin' up yore mind, so I brought along this to help yuh." Chick put his left hand into his shirt and drew out a blacksnake whip. "We use 'em to persuade jackasses up in Montana, but I reckon it'll work just as well with a Texas polecat."

At the sight of the whip, Morton turned a sickly yellow, but he managed to control his voice.

"Yuh wouldn't dare try that, Wilson. Yuh wouldn't leave town alive, an' yuh know it."

"That," Chick told him, "is the sort o' sheep dip yuh've been ladlin' out ever since I landed in this section, but I'm still above the sod an' aimin' to stay there! Now Morton, get this, an' get it straight. If yuh really was to get what's comin' to yuh, yuh'd be staked out on a ant hill; but I'm sorta easy-goin', an' I'm givin' yuh a chance.

"Yuh can march over to the General Store an' own up publicly to the fact that yo're the rottenest, meanest liar in the State of Texas, an' they won't no harm come to yuh; or yuh can refuse—an' I'll knock yore ears off with this whip, an' wallop yuh until yore own mother wouldn't know yuh. I'm givin' yuh one minute to decide."

Alternate currents of fear and hatred lashed Morton into fury. His Colt was almost at his twitching finger-tips, but he dared not go for it. Even in his rage, he realized that before he could unlimber his weapon, the Lazy Y foreman would kill him.

Yet something had to be done. If he stood up and made a public apology, he would be booted out of the county as a coward and a craven. If he didn't, he'd take the beating of his life and be disgraced, anyway. And if he tried to shoot it out with Chick Wilson, he would be planted in a pine box.

There was only one possible chance of escaping from his dilemma. Wilson was proud, infernally so. Perhaps an appeal in that direction would work. There was a crafty look in Morton's eyes as he said:

"Yuh've got me, Wilson, an' I reckon I got to do as yuh say. I ain't never set up to be no gunman, an' I freely admit that yuh can beat me to the draw. I know yo're tryin' to egg me into makin' a move for my gun so's yuh can shoot me in cold blood.

"If yuh was on the level, yuh wouldn't be takin' no such advantage. If yuh wasn't packin' a gun, I'd take that whip away from yuh, an' yuh know it. Then I'd break yuh in two, an' yuh know that, too. Just because yuh hung a lucky punch on my jaw the first time we met, don't mean nothin'. I'd sure like to get another chance at yuh, but I don't reckon yuh got the guts to give it to me."

Chick stared at him coldly.

"If yo're aimin' to swap punches with me, I reckon I can accommodate yuh," he said at last. "Afterwards, there'll still be time to have yuh make that speech in the store. I reckon the dance hall upstairs will do as well as any place. Frisco, here, will be lookin' after my interests." Chick nodded toward the little cowboy who had followed him into the saloon.

"Yo're whoopin' right I'll be lookin' after yuh," Frisco said. He turned and addressed the crowd of men who, in some curious fashion, had got wind of what was going on and had come crowding into the Silver Spur. "Which one of yuh wants to be chief mourner for Mike Morton?"

"Reckon I'll handle him," growled Steve Pritchard, one of Morton's close friends.

"That's swell," Willy said with ap-

proval. "Now all we need is a referee. Who's takin' the job?"

"Guess I will," said Pete Dolan of the Flying W, stepping out of the crowd.

"Guess again, hombre," Willy advised. "I'm callin' for a referee who'll be on the level. Morton's friends is out."

After a deal of bickering, Dick Baxter was chosen; not because he knew very much about the finer points of the manly art of self-defense, but because he was honest and everyone in the Caswell Valley knew it.

"Now that we're all set," said Frisco, "I'm askin' yuh gents to line up at the bar an' check yore hardware with the Dutchman. Elsewise, hit the breeze. We ain't fixin' to have no waddy get het up an' start shootin' while the scrap is goin' on."

One by one, the men filed over to the bar and handed their guns to Dutch Schmidt, who placed them on the ledge under the counter. Then the cowboys tramped upstairs and into the dance hall, which looked dull and gloomy in the little daylight that filtered through the grimy window panes.

Wilson and Morton took off their chaps and boots and stripped to the waist. Chick was coolly imperturbable as he waited for the referee to send them into action. Morton was exultant. His strategy had won, and now he was going to beat the Lazy Y foreman to a pulp. He was convinced that the blow which had felled him that other morning in the coulee had been a lucky one. The time for his revenge was at hand, and he intended to make the most of it.

He was keen, eager for the battle to commence. No one had ever bested him in a fist fight, and certainly that record was not going to be marred by a man thirty pounds lighter.

They were two magnificent specimens of human flesh. Morton had shoulders like a stevedore, a barrel-like chest, huge arms, and a back that seemed strong enough to lift a piano. His waist showed a slight bulge and his legs seemed a bit soft; but these things were to be expected. Morton was pretty close to forty, and for years he had enjoyed what is loosely termed "good living."

At first glance, Wilson seemed almost frail by comparison. His shoulders lacked the massive power that was so obviously in Morton's, and his arms were small indeed when measured by the heroic proportions of his adversary's biceps; but under the skin, his muscles rippled, his stomach resembled a corrugated washboard, and his legs were straight and firm.

"'A lean hoss fer a long race,'" observed a puncher in an undertone. "If this scrap lasts more than a few rounds, I reckon Wilson will win."

"Yuh think so?" demanded Morton, who had overheard the remark. "I'll bet yuh twenty cows this here jasper don't go two rounds against me!"

"Nothin' doin', Mike. I ain't never seen either of yuh scrap; but I'll bet yuh two hundred bucks, even, that he'll give yuh a fine an' fancy pastin' if it goes more than ten rounds!"

Morton laughed jeeringly.

"I'd like to accommodate yuh, but there ain't no use bettin' on somethin' that won't never happen. . . . But I'll bet yuh," he shouted across the improvised ring at Chick Wilson, "that I knock yuh cock-eyed before five rounds, yuh wall-eyed polecat!"

"Don't never bet on myself," Chick replied in a quiet drawl. "It's bad luck."

"Yuh use damn good judgment!" Morton sneered. "Well, if there's anyone else who thinks more of this jasper than he does of himself, I'll give him a run for his money."

"I'm takin' it," snapped Frisco Willy. "My hoss against yores, my hat against yores, my clothes an' guns against yores, an' a hundred frog skins against a like pile of yores. I'd bet yuh more, but that's all I've got."

"Yo're on, runt, an' I hope yuh

don't get fried hoofin' it back to the Lazy Y!"

"We've had enough chin-waggin'," said Dick Baxter. "I'm aimin' to start this here fight. It'll be fought under regulation rules, an' the first guy I catch foulin' will get slapped silly with the butt of my forty-five. Which, seein' as how I'm the gent who has been appointed to run this entertainment, I reckon I can tote without arousin' no hard feelin's.

"The rounds'll be three minutes long, with a minute in between, an' the fight'll last until one of yuh hombres gets knocked stiff. I reckon yuh don't want to bother with shakin' hands. Hop to it!"

A ring had been fixed, with lariats tied to table legs and chairs. Dutch Schmidt, who had temporarily abandoned his duties downstairs for the more exciting position of timekeeper, beat a bung-starter upon a dishpan which had been commandeered for service as a gong, and the fight was on.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Morton Makes a Deal*

MORTON started with a wild rush, uncorked a right swing from somewhere near the floor and aimed it at Chick's head. Had it landed, the fight would have been finished then and there, but Wilson slipped the punch and, stepping inside of Morton's guard, hammered lefts and rights into the big man's stomach.

"Atta boy!" Frisco Willy shouted. "Keep sockin' him in the pantry. None of 'em likes it there."

Morton grunted a bit and backed up. Chick followed him across the ring, shooting a stinging left into his nose. They fell into a clinch. And here Morton received the surprise of his life. Instead of being able to handle Chick with ease, he found that he had all that he could do to keep Wilson from punishing him badly.

Schmidt thumped the dishpan and the first round ended. It was Chick's by a mile.

"Who's crazy now?" howled Frisco. "Hi, Mike, how did yuh like them stingers on yore smeller?"

Morton did not reply. He was too busy trying to catch his wind. The man whom he had considered a set-up had actually outpointed him during the first round. He swore that it would not happen again.

However, the second round was much like the first, with the difference that Chick concentrated his attack upon Morton's midriff; and before the clanging dishpan sent the men back to their corners, pink welts appeared upon Mike's stomach.

The third round opened mildly enough. They both swung lefts to the head and missed. Chick drove a hard right-hand blow to the wind and took a smash on the jaw in return. But it was a glancing blow and he laughed it off and came back with a vicious left hook that shook Morton to his heels.

It enraged Mike and he started another punch from somewhere near his feet. Chick saw it coming and started to sidestep, but his right foot slipped on the polished dance floor and Morton's fist caught him flush on the jaw. He went down as if he had been tapped with a mallet. Baxter droned out the count—six...seven...eight.

The clang of the dishpan saved Chick from being counted out and Frisco Willy climbed through the ropes and sped across the ring. Chick was glassy-eyed and as limp as a rag. Frisco dragged him to his corner and worked over him like a Trojan, but he remained dead to the world.

Frisco dumped a pail of cold water on him. Chick merely mumbled unintelligibly and slumped back on the stool. Finally, in sheer desperation, Willy leaned over and sank his teeth into the lobe of Chick's left ear. Wilson stirred a bit, opened his eyes and smiled weakly.

The tin pan clanged.

"Keep away from him!" Frisco hissed fiercely, as Chick stumbled unsteadily to his feet and staggered forward to meet his enemy. "It's yore only chance—keep away!"

Morton dashed across the ring, bent upon finishing the fight at once. He shot left and right, but Chick managed to cover up and the blows did little damage. His head was aching horribly and his eyes were still foggy, but he had sense enough to fall into a clinch whenever possible, and to hold on until the referee forced them to break.

"Yuh yeller dog!" Morton snarled, beside himself with rage when he found that he was unable to hammer Wilson to the floor. "Why in hell don't yuh fight like a man?"

Chick promptly fell into another clinch.

"May I have the next waltz?" squeaked a big, good-natured puncher in a high falsetto voice. The crowd laughed and hooted uproariously, but Chick didn't care. His head was gradually clearing and except for that one lucky punch, Morton hadn't really hurt him.

"How are yuh feelin'?" Frisco demanded anxiously, when the tin pan put an end to the round.

"Better. I reckon I'll make it." Chick realized that if he could weather one or two more rounds, his strength would return and he would be able to take a chance and trade wallops with Morton. Meanwhile, he would box.

And box he did. He feinted, jabbed, ducked, parried, slip-punched, rolled, hooked and danced through four rounds. Not once did he fire with his right hand.

Morton was like a bear fighting bees. He aimed wild punches that never found their marks, slashed his huge paws through the air at places Chick had recently vacated, or charged at the smaller man like a mad steer. Upon these latter occasions Chick sidestepped and jabbed him in the nose.

The ninth round opened as had all the others. Morton was intent upon grinding his adversary into the floor, forcing the fighting every minute. Frisco Willy was really worried. After all, he reasoned, handling a husky galoot like Morton in the clinches would wear anyone down in time. When Chick dropped to the floor and took a count of nine, Frisco was sure that the end was in sight.

So was Morton; and as Chick got to his feet, he rushed in to deliver the final blow. Chick staggered forward as if hoping to get into a clinch. But when he got in close, instead of grabbing Morton, he shifted his tactics, straightened up and shot his right fist for the first time in five rounds.

It landed a little high, but close enough to the button to make the big fellow groggy. He made a grab for Chick and would have clinched, but Wilson ducked and hammered home a left hook to the nose. It smeared Morton's olfactory organ all over his face. Chick stung him again—a right, two lefts, a right hook, a left jab and a solid right-hand smash.

And then the metallic whang.

"I thought yuh had him sure," said Frisco Willy, as he sponged the blood from Chick's back. "Boy, he's bleedin' like a hawg in a Dodge City slaughter house. He's our meat now!"

Morton did not rush out of his corner for the start of the tenth round. Instead, he got to his feet and shuffled forward in an aimless fashion. His nose was broken. His eyes were mere swollen slits and his lips were cut and bleeding. Wilson met him in the center of the ring. Mike swung a wild haymaker. Chick continued to jab and hook while waiting for another chance to shoot his right.

Morton was game; there was no question about that. He had absorbed enough punishment to make half a dozen ordinary men quit; but he kept

boring in, his chin tucked against his hunched left shoulder, his right arm swinging like a flail.

Suddenly Chick shifted his attack back to Morton's body. Rights and lefts hammered against Mike's badly battered mid-section. Slowly, like a giant oak beginning to sway under the strokes of the ax Morton started rocking. Chick stepped in, cool as a professional, measured his man and shot his right fist. This time the blow did not land high. Morton crumpled to the floor and lay perfectly still. Dick Baxter counted him out and then helped carry him from the ring.

"Yow-ee!" shouted Frisco Willy. "That's the most fun I've had since Peg Leg Walters caught his whiskers in the ice-cream freezer. Now for the store and that apology!"

"Naw," Chick protested. "I reckon that's out. I don't aim to kick a dawg when he's down. He'll behave now, more'n two-thirds likely."

But he gave the Box H owner credit for a decency which the latter did not possess. When the bets had been settled and the crowd had dispersed, Morton, decidedly the worse for wear, limped downstairs to the bar.

"Yuh remember what we was talkin' about when all this ruckus started, don't yuh?" he asked, after tossing off the whiskey which the barkeep set before him.

"Yeah," Dutch replied innocently. "Yuh was tellin' me how yuh aimed to run a certain party out of the county an'—"

Morton glared at him from under puffy eyelids.

"Don't try to be funny. I mean before that."

"Oh, yuh mean about my oil lands!"

"Oil lands be damned! They ain't worth nothin', but I want 'em. I'll pay yuh five thousand dollars for the whole tract, but the deal must be kept quiet until I give the word to let it out."

Schmidt did some rapid thinking. If Mike were willing to pay that much for the land and wanted the deal kept quiet, something must be up. If he held out, he'd be able to get more. He shook his head.

"Nothin' doin', Mike. Twenty thousand is my price, an' I'm stickin' to it."

"Listen, Schmidt," Morton said in a hard, rasping voice. "I'll fork over eight thousand an' not a damn cent more. Take it or I'll have yuh run out of town before mornin'. Sabe? I mean it!"

It was clear that he did, and having no desire to leave town on a rail, and with the chances that he'd have a goodly supply of tar and chicken feathers to keep him warm, Schmidt agreed to Morton's terms.

## CHAPTER V

### *The Great Camel Tract*

BETTY PARSONS and Chick Wilson had left the Lazy Y shortly after breakfast, followed along the west bank of the Caswell River for half an hour, crossed the rich grazing lands which were both the pride and profit of Old Man Parsons, and then ridden into the more rugged country.

"Our property ends beyond that next ridge," Betty said, indicating the broken horizon to the northwest, "where the Great Camel Field begins. I reckon you've heard of that."

Wilson chuckled.

"Yeah, I've heard of it, all right. Dutch Schmidt tried to sell it to me the first day I strolled into the Silver Spur!"

"It's absolutely worthless, of course," she said, "just arid desert land; but the view from that ridge is the finest in the whole county. You notice the notch up there beyond the mesa? Well, from that point you can see all over the surrounding country. Suppose we ride over?"

They cantered down the slope, crossed the stretch of bottom land and climbed to a flat bench whose

rock-capped, precipitous sides stood like so many giant sentinels guarding the country beyond against the encroachments of civilization. The mesa was barren and dusty, huge cacti, an occasional mescal, and here and there a dwarfed, scrubby mesquite being the only vegetation upon it.

They rode along in silence—the silence of complete understanding. They had been riding together much during the month since Chick had whipped Morton in the Silver Spur dance hall. Sometimes Wilson wondered what it was all going to lead to. But Betty Parsons didn't wonder; she knew.

On their right, far away in the valley, the Caswell River sparkled in the morning sunlight as it wound its way through the Lazy Y lands and on to join the Rio Grande. On their left, a steep, jagged mountain rose abruptly from the side of the trail and seemed to breathe defiance, daring them to scale its towering flanks.

But the real view lay before them. The trail continued for a few yards and then bent sharply to the left, disappearing around the shoulder of the mountain, so that they found themselves almost on the rim of a canyon whose sides fell sharply away to the river some five hundred feet below.

The rough, weather-beaten slope of the rocky wall was studded with boulders and clumps of juniper, blackjack, post-oak and hackberries. The trees were more numerous toward the bottom of the canyon, the foliage denser, until at the river's edge it was almost a thicket.

"Hello!" Chick exclaimed suddenly. "Somethin' seems to be stirrin' down there." His keen ears had detected a pounding noise, and as he listened more intently, he could also hear men talking. "Mebbe Schmidt is drillin' an oil well," he surmised with a chuckle.

"Just beyond that bend in the trail," Betty said, "there is a path that winds down to the river. I can't imagine what anybody'd want 'way out here. Let's ride down and see."

But upon rounding the curve in the trail, they found their progress blocked by a five-strand fence of heavy barbed wire. Nailed to one of the posts was a large white board with but two words painted upon it in letters a foot high:

KEEP OUT!

"Well, for heaven's sake," Betty ejaculated. "Dutch Schmidt never had money enough to build that fence! And besides, why a fence at all? Our new neighbor—whoever he is—doesn't seem friendly!"

"Must be some dude aimin' to hole up here an' keep away from folks," Chuck suggested. "I— Hello!" he exclaimed, as a horseman came into view about a hundred yards down the trail. "I reckon I was wrong. That hombre ain't forkin' his cayuse for no dude ranch."

"I should say not!" Betty exclaimed excitedly. "That's Slick Henderson, the Box H foreman! If Mike Morton has bought the Camel Tract, he'll own land on three sides of us! I don't like it, Chick!"

Slick Henderson rode up at a smart pace. He was a middle-sized puncher, chunky and hard as nails. His ten-gallon hat was thrust to the back of his head at a rakish angle and added to the unpleasant impression created by his leering eyes. He was dressed in a blue denim shirt, overalls and low-topped boots, and he might have passed for an Iowa farmer except for his gunbelts and ugly-looking weapons.

"Howdy, pardner," said Wilson pleasantly, as the Box H puncher pulled up a few feet from the fence. "What's goin' on down below? Hit on a gold mine or somethin'?"

"Well, I wouldn't call it that exactly, but we aim to have a little privacy."

"So we gathered from the gentle hint," remarked Betty Parsons, nodding at the sign.

"Yeah," said Henderson. "I don't reckon it would be exactly healthy for any jasper to come prowlin' around, neither. Us fellers has orders to keep everybody out. An' especially anyone from the Lazy Y. Sabe?"

"Right neighborly, ain't yuh?" Chick drawled. "What's Morton doin' this time? Is he fixin' to cook up another ruckus?"

"If I told yuh, yuh'd know as much as I do," Henderson answered insolently, "an' it'd be plumb unfortunate for the county to have two such smart hombres in it."

"In that case," Chick told him, "I'd keep my trap shut if I was yuh, cowboy; that is, unless yo're aimin' to leave for parts unknown. Me, I like it fine here an' I'm figurin' on stickin' around permanent."

"Yeah? Yuh sound sorta like yuh was wedded to the sod. Reckon yuh'll be buried here some day, huh?"

Chick shrugged jauntily.

"Yuh can't never tell. Say, Mister, I hope Morton checked up on his line before he run that fence. It would plumb break my heart if he had to pull it down."

"Listen, Wilson!" Slick Henderson's tone was ugly. "The fence is up to stay; don't make no mistake about that. An' let me tell yuh again—that there sign means exactly what it says!" He wheeled his horse and rode down the trail, disappearing in a thicket of cedars and hackberries near the river bank.

Chick's face was grave as he turned to Betty.

"Somethin' nasty is brewin', I'm afraid, ma'am. Morton can't use that land no more than a coyote wants two tails. I'd like to know what's goin' on down there, an' by golly, I'm goin' to find out!"

"Be careful, Chick," Betty urged. "Remember, the land is posted. Under the law, you'd be trespassing and they'd have a right to put you off forcibly if necessary. I wouldn't put it past them to shoot you down in cold blood and claim you caused a disturbance when they ordered you off, so that they had to do it in self-defense!"

"That's a right nice picture yo're paintin' of my finish," Chick observed dryly, "but don't worry, ma'am, I ain't aimin' to ride down there now an' be bushwhacked by some jasper that would likely get a extra dollar or so for doin' it! Still and all, I've got to find out what special cussedness Mike Morton's up to."

"I suppose you have. But—oh, Chick, I *do* worry!" Betty said earnestly; and then realizing the tone in which she had spoken, she turned in her saddle to hide her confusion.

However, Chick gave no sign that he had noticed it. There was a time and a place for everything; and when he told Betty Parsons how deeply he had come to care for her, it would not be in full view of one of Mike Morton's hired killers!

## CHAPTER VI

### *Betty Takes a Hand*

IT lacked an hour of dawn when Chick Wilson rode back across the mesa and started up the gentle grade which would bring him to the notch. Reaching the summit of the slope, he reined in his pony and dismounted.

After tethering the animal to a convenient mesquite scrub, he drew his Winchester from the saddle scabbard and leaned it against a boulder. Then he removed his six-guns from their holsters, unhitched his belts and hung them over the cantle of his saddle.

Next he took off his chaps and riding boots and slipped his feet into a pair of moccasins which he fished out of a saddle bag. With a Colt thrust into each hip pocket and carrying his rifle, he moved down the slope with long, silent strides that would have done credit to an Indian.

He knew that Morton would never leave his newly acquired property unguarded. Whatever the owner of the

Box H was up to—and Chick was morally certain that it was some particularly unpleasant kind of deviltry—it was clear that he did not wish to be disturbed.

Unquestionably, some of his men would be along the river level or lurking in the scrub. Chick hoped to slip down the side of the canyon, find out what was going on along the Caswell and get away without being discovered. If his suspicions proved groundless, he would say nothing about his nocturnal prowlings. On the other hand, if he did turn up some sculduggery, he would be able to plan for the Lazy Y's protection.

Fifty yards from where he judged the fence blocked the trail, he turned at right angles and out into the scrub timber. About a hundred feet farther along he halted, listened intently for a moment and then turned to his left and worked his way down noiselessly toward the wire.

It was very dark; the sky was starless and Chick moved with extreme caution. Reaching the barbed wire, he paused and listened again. Then, convinced that no one was aware of his presence, he slid his rifle under the lowest strand of wire and rolled after it.

Carefully he made his way down the steep side of the canyon, testing every step before he threw his weight forward, lest he dislodge a stone and send it rattling down the rugged slope. The dead leaves and underbrush did not bother him; he had spent virtually all of his life in the open and he knew how to glide silently over the ground.

The embers of a dying campfire glowed dully below him. In the uncertain light, he could discern the figure of a man rolled up in a blanket. Beyond was the river, but it was hidden in the shadows and Chick could not see it. Taking his bearings from the position of the fire, he swung off to the right in a wide semicircle and approached the water's edge.

With the glow of the campfire now behind him, he was able to distinguish objects in front quite clearly; and he stared in open-mouthed amazement at the sight which met his eyes. Along the river bank, innumerable bags of cement were piled; there were rolls of iron re-enforcing rods, a miscellaneous collection of picks, grub-axes, shovels and other tools, and a large concrete mixer, looking like some weird animal crouching close to the water.

"Reach for the sky, hombre!" came a harsh voice at his back, and the barrel of a six-gun was pressed against his spine. Mechanically he raised his hands; there was nothing else he could do. "That's showin' right good sense! Now step over into the light where I can get a squint at yuh."

The voice was Slick Henderson's; Chick recognized it, as obedient to the command he moved closer to the campfire.

"Yeah; I reckoned it was yuh. We've been kinda expectin' yuh. . . . Hi, there, Joe! Wake up! He's come."

The man hailed as Joe stirred, blinked, and tossing his blanket aside, lumbered to his feet.

"Well, if it ain't little Lord Fauntleroy!" he jeered. "All decked out like Astor's plush horse, even to a nice shiny rifle an' them two fancy six-guns, ain't yuh? Sweetheart, yo're as welcome as the flowers in May!"

"Yuh bet yuh are!" Slick Henderson chuckled. "The boss promised us five hundred bucks if we ketched yuh. Come on, lift his cannon, Joe."

"How long have yuh been playin' at bein' badmen?" Chick wanted to know scornfully, as Joe Hornbeck jerked his weapons from his pockets and tossed them on the ground near the fire.

"Listen, hombre," said Slick, "we ain't playin', an' yuh'll realize it before yo're much older. An' we ain't settin' up to be badmen, neither. Just honest cowpokes protectin' the property of their boss, huh, Joe?"

"Sure. These lands is posted an' Wilson knowed it. The least the sheriff'll do is to pack him in cold storage for ninety days."

Chick's eyes narrowed.

"So that's yore game, is it?"

"Yeah; that's it. Leastwise, that's what we're plannin' on. Of course, if yuh was to try to run away now, mebbe that jail sentence wouldn't hold good!" There was a sinister note in Henderson's laugh, and Chick realized only too well the seriousness of his position. He hadn't the least doubt that somewhere between the campfire and the county jail he would get his billet, and that the men would swear that he had been trying to escape.

He cursed himself for a fool. Something had to be done and done quickly; but just what he could do he didn't know. Henderson kept a gun trained on his stomach and Chick knew that the fellow was waiting only for a plausible excuse to use it.

"Well, Joe," Henderson said, "I reckon there ain't no use of us hangin' around here no longer. We got what we was waitin' for. Tromp out that fire an' let's get started. We—"

He spun halfway around, stumbled and went down as a rifle cracked out sharply and a bullet tore through his right forearm. A second shot churned up the turf at Joe Hornbeck's feet.

Without a second's hesitation Chick dodged and jumped sideways; and just in time, for Henderson, rolling over and transferring the gun to his left hand, fired at him almost point-blank. A third time the rifle cracked and Henderson slumped back to the ground in a motionless heap.

"Up with your hands, Hornbeck!" The sound of the clear young voice set Chick's heart to pounding. "I can't miss!"

Cursing volubly, Joe Hornbeck dropped his gun and raised his hands high in the air.

"Betty!" Chick Wilson shouted. As she came through the brush on the farther side of the fire, he snatched up his guns and strode over to Hornbeck.

"One funny move from yuh, hombre," he said in flint-like tones, "an' yuh'll make a swell meal for a flock of buzzards. I know damn well what yuh an' that other jasper was fixin' to do, an' I'm not goin' to mess with yuh at all."

"What are yuh aimin' to do to us?" Hornbeck whined, but Chick ignored him.

"Betty, cut the rope off one of them packs an' bring it to me, will yuh?" he asked; and then when Hornbeck had been safely trussed up, he turned his attention to Slick Henderson.

"Did I—" Betty faltered, biting her lips.

"No, dang the luck! One through the right arm an' a creased forehead. He'll live!"

"Oh, I'm so glad!" she exclaimed.

"Women is funny people," Chick observed, as he rolled up Slick Henderson's blood-soaked sleeve. "Here yuh are plumb tickled 'cause he ain't cashed in his checks, an' a couple of minutes ago yuh shot to kill!"

"But that was when you were in danger. I don't want to see him suffer. Don't you understand?"

"Oh, mebbe I understand part of it anyway," said Chick. With a handkerchief he staunched the flow of blood from Henderson's arm and then bound the man securely. During the process Slick regained consciousness, but he was still too dazed to talk coherently.

"I ain't untyin' yuh hombres," Chick said to Hornbeck, who scowled but remained silent, "because yo're a pair of snake-blooded coyotes an' I just can't trust yuh at all. When yore pals get here, an' I reckon there'll be plenty of 'em along after sunup, they can cut yuh loose. . . . Are yuh ready, Betty?"

The girl nodded her assent and in a moment they strode off through the brush and worked their way up the

side of the canyon. It wasn't until they reached their horses that either of them spoke again.

"I haven't been able to figure out yet how yuh happened to be here," Chick said. "Not that I'm kickin', yuh understand, for yuh sure saved my hide, all right; but I'll be eternally dawggoned if I can dope the whole thing out."

"I guess I must have been half awake," she explained, "for I heard you when you rode out of the yard. When Timmy loped off toward the northwest, I was sure I knew where you were going. So I hopped into some clothes, saddled up and followed." Her voice was very sweet—and very cool. "You see," she explained sweetly—too sweetly, "I was afraid you might run into trouble, and I didn't want you to be hurt while you were working for the Lazy Y Ranch."

She stretched out her hand for her horse's bridle, but Chick caught her arm.

"Is that the only reason?" he demanded.

"What other could there possibly be?" She tried to affect surprise, but the effort wasn't very successful; and she could feel the warmth of the color that crept rosily into her cheeks.

Chick laughed softly.

"Oh, I dunno. I just thought mebbe—Aw, look at me, girl, won't yuh?"

There was very little light there among the trees, but it was enough for him to see in her face that which he wanted to see. And there was no leering-eyed Slick Henderson watching him now. His arms went around her and for a moment he held her close. Then he bent his head and kissed her red lips tenderly, possessively.

"An' I reckon that's reason enough for any man!" he whispered. "We're sure goin' to have a heap of news to spring on yore dad in the mornin'! I hope to Joshua he'll think *some* of it's good!"

## CHAPTER VII

### *An Unpleasant Situation*

SHERIFF ED WEAVER shot a stream of tobacco juice with unerring aim into the big brass spittoon, standing under the gun-rack on the wall of the filthy little office of the county jail which served as his headquarters, and shook his head slowly from side to side.

"This is bad business yo're gettin' into, Mike, an' I ain't hankerin' to have nothin' to do with it," he said.

Morton gave him a hard glare.

"Yo're the sheriff of Caswell County, ain't yuh?"

"Yeah, I'm that, all right," Weaver conceded.

"An' yuh know who got yuh the job, don't yuh?"

"I reckon."

"Then if yuh want to stay in office yuh better execute them warrants."

"Yuh got me all wrong, Mike. I ain't tryin' to throw yuh down; yuh'd ought to know that. I'm just tryin' to get yuh to realize that yuh ain't so all-fired popular with folks in this section of the country, an' they'll raise hell a-plenty if yuh put that Parsons gal in jail."

"I'll take my chances on that," Morton growled. "After all, it ain't no hair off yore hide. Me an' Slick has sworn out warrants, an' as sheriff of the county, yuh gotta serve 'em."

"Yuh make it sound a heap easier than it's goin' to be," Weaver complained. "I reckon yuh think all I've got to do is to tap Wilson on the shoulder, an' say, 'Come on, big boy,' an' he'll ride gentle-like back to town."

"No. I know damn well it ain't goin' to be no picnic," Morton admitted. "But yo're goin' through with it just the same. Yuh swear me an' a bunch of my men in as deputies; we'll all ride out to the Lazy Y together an' Wilson won't have a chance."

"That's goin' to look kinda fishy," Weaver objected.

"I don't give three cheers in a corral how it looks. Yo're goin' to bring them two in, an' Judge Carlton is goin' to hold 'em in twenty thousand dollars bail, pendin' the openin' of the fall term of the court. An' I'll see to it that nobody don't come through with a bond for 'em."

"But yuh know damn well no jury in this county is goin' to convict 'em, Mike, especially Betty Parsons!"

"I ain't lookin' for no conviction, yuh fool!" Morton was exasperated. "All I want to do is to keep Chick Wilson out of action until fall."

"There'd ought to be an easier way of keepin' him out of action—permanent," the sheriff hinted darkly.

"Yeah? Mebbe yuh ain't the only one who's had that idea. But it won't work. That hombre is plumb hard to shave, Ed. Yuh issue them warrants, ride out to my place an' swear in the boys, an' then we'll go over to the Lazy Y an' collect the customers for yore boardin' house."

BETTY PARSONS was lying in a hammock, lazily turning the pages of a fashion magazine. She had made a note of several patterns that caught her fancy, and decided that she'd have to go into San Antonio in the not too distant future and do some shopping.

Her father was sitting in an easy chair reading a two-day-old copy of the Austin *Statesman*. The front page carried an account of Jeb Coleman's announcement that he was going to run for governor again. Old Man Parsons, who was a strong supporter of the brilliant young chief executive, was delighted.

"Good for Jeb!" he said to himself. "If them greasy, pot-bellied politicians that stink up Capitol Hill would give him half a chance, he'd do more for Texas in six months than the rest of 'em could do in sixty years."

A chorus of shouts interrupted his meditations, and he jumped to his feet in time to see the sheriff, Mike Morton, and half a dozen cowboys ride into the yard. As they were dismounting, Chick Wilson came out of the bunkhouse and strolled over to them.

"Howdy, Sheriff," he said. "I don't think much of the company yo're keepin', but what can I do for yuh?"

"Got a warrant for yore arrest," Ed Weaver explained. "If yo're wise, yuh'll come along peaceable. I ain't aimin' to have no trouble with yuh, Wilson."

"Let me see yore warrant," said Chick shortly.

"Here it is." Weaver extended the document, and as Chick reached out to take it, Morton covered him with a forty-five.

"Take his smoke-poles away from him," the owner of the Box H commanded, and a cowpuncher stepped forward and lifted Chick's revolvers.

"What in hell's goin' on here?" demanded Old Man Parsons, striding down the steps, closely followed by Betty.

"Plenty," said the sheriff. "Morton an' Henderson has swore out warrants against Chick Wilson an' yore daughter for trespassin' an' assault with intent to kill."

"Not for Betty!" Old Man Parsons ejaculated in blank amazement. "Why—"

"Yes, for Betty," snapped Morton. "She rode over on my property an' damn near killed Slick Henderson. I don't reckon even a woman can get away with that stuff."

The Old Man looked from one to the other with a troubled frown.

"What yuh aimin' to do with 'em, Weaver?" he asked.

"I'm plumb sorry, Mr. Parsons, but I reckon I'll have to put 'em in the calaboose until Judge Carlton sets the bail."

"Yuh know that jail ain't no fit place for a woman," Chick protested. "I'll go along with yuh, all right; but leave Miss Parsons out of it."

The sheriff hesitated.

"Well, I dunno—"

"Just a minute, Ed," Morton said. "There may be some way that we can fix this up. Yuh keep Wilson here while me an' Old Man Parsons has a talk. . . . Yuh might come along, Betty." He strode up the porch steps, followed, after a moment's hesitation, by the girl and her father.

"Now I don't want to be hard on yuh," he went on hypocritically, when they were out of earshot of the men in the yard, "but shootin' folks is mighty serious business, no matter who does it. However, I reckon I can persuade Slick to drop his charges, providin' yuh'll all agree to clear out of the Caswell Valley an'—"

"Clear out of the Caswell Valley!" Betty exclaimed. "Why, I was born here, and it's been Dad's home for over forty years!"

Morton laughed—a dry, soul-cracking little laugh.

"Yuh should've thought o' that before yuh come on my property an' shot up my foreman. Fences an' post notices mean somethin' in Texas, nowadays. But I aim to be fair. I'll take this place off your dad's hands an' give him thirty thousand dollars for it."

"Yuh'll give me *what?*" demanded the owner of the Lazy Y.

"You heard me. I said thirty thousand dollars."

"Don't pay any attention to him, Dad." Betty laid her hand on her father's arm, her blue eyes flashing. "Listen here, Mike Morton; you know as well as I do that this ranch is worth a hundred thousand dollars if it's worth a dime. Why, there's over seventy-five thousand dollars' worth of stock on it right now!"

"Yeah, there is, *right now;* but with yuh and Wilson in the calaboose an' my dam shuttin' off the river water, I reckon that seventy-five thousand dollars' worth of stock'll start dyin' like flies at a Flit party when the July drought comes!"

"Your dam!" Betty repeated in incredulous dismay.

"Sure, my dam. What did yuh think that cement an' iron was for?"

"But—but Chick told me you were going to build a bridge!"

"Sure he did, honey," said her father. "He just didn't want to start yuh worryin'. A dam—"

"I ain't got no time to listen to yuh two gassin'," Mike Morton broke in roughly. "Parsons, either yuh'll sell out to me for thirty thousand or Betty goes to jail along with that gun-totin' jasper out in the yard. An' then I'll finish the dam an' break yuh, anyway."

The Old Man's face was white and working.

"Why, yuh—yuh crook!' he stuttered. "Yuh've got no right to dam the river! I'll get an injunction—"

"Go ahead," grinned Morton. "An' whiles yo're about it, Betty'll be in the hoosegow. Is that yore final word, Parsons?"

"No—I—that is—"

"Yes, it's just that!" cried Betty. "Be quiet, Dad," as her father tried to interrupt. "This is my affair, and I'm going through with it. You're not going to throw away the work of a lifetime just because I may be a little uncomfortable! . . . Morton, call your blackguards; I'll go with you!"

"I don't hardly reckon that'll be necessary, Miss Betty." All three turned around in startled surprise to see Frisco Willy sitting on the window ledge, hidden from the men in the yard by the vines trailing over the porch. His Colt was trained on Mike Morton.

"Take his hardware from him, Mr. Parsons," Frisco directed. "Now, then, Morton, I reckon I'm goin' to draw cards in this game, an' I'm warnin' yuh, one yip out of yuh, an' yore mangy hide'll look like a gravel strainer. I ain't never had no wild, overpowerin' love for yuh, an' after listenin' to what's been goin' on here, I like yuh even less. Plunkin' yuh would give me a heap of pleasure."

Speechless, Morton glared at the little cowboy. Frisco was generally accounted rather easy-going, but the glint in his steel-gray eyes told Morton that the Lazy Y puncher meant business.

"March into the livin' room an' make it snappy! . . . Yuh folks, too, please," Willy said, nodding to Betty and her father. "Mike an' me ain't got no secrets! . . . Now first off, Morton," he continued when they were inside, "yo're goin' to write a note to the sheriff, sayin' yuh've changed yore mind, an' orderin' him to release Chick Wilson."

"I'll be damned if I will!" Morton snarled.

"Yuh'll be wishin' it was only that if yuh don't!" Willy warned him pointedly. "Miss Betty, fetch this jasper some paper an' a pen, will yuh, please?"

Betty got writing materials and put them on the table.

"Go to it, Morton!"

Morton made no move to write, and Frisco Willy's thumb hovered significantly over the hammer of his forty-five.

"I'm givin' yuh just thirty seconds to make up yore mind," he said.

The gesture decided it. His hand shaking with rage so that he could scarcely guide the pen, Morton scrawled his message to Sheriff Weaver. Frisco looked it over, grunted his approval and called to Ching Lee, who was busy in the kitchen peeling potatoes.

"Ching, waltz this out to the sheriff an' tell Wilson that Mr. Parsons wants him in here, pronto."

The Chinese took the note and shuffled out to deliver it.

"Yuh was blowin' a lot about law an' order a few minutes ago, Morton," Frisco resumed. "Well, I'm for it. Not that I'm settin myself up for no lawyer—though I'll be hawgtied an' branded if I don't think I could do a better job than most of the legal sidewinders in this county—but seems to me I remember somethin' about there bein' a law against extortion, or whatever.

"I heard every word yuh said about buyin' the Lazy Y for thirty thousand bucks an' gettin' Slick to drop his charges against Chick an' Miss Betty; an' if that ain't blackmail, I'll eat a pail of mud with cactus in it. So I'm askin' yuh to write some more, like I tell yuh. Grab that pen an' commence."

In picturesque language which he privately considered to be the acme of legal phraseology, Frisco Willy dictated a statement.

"Put yore brand on it now," he ordered as Morton finished writing it down. "That's the stuff. Now, I'm goin' to keep this in a nice safe place, an' the next time yuh start somethin' I'll use it where it'll do the most good."

"Are yuh done with me?" Morton demanded gruffly.

"Don't be so sudden. Yo're to sit right here until Chick is turned loose."

"He's on the porch now," Betty said in relieved tones.

"That bein' the case, Morton," Willy said, "yo're excused. Beat it while the beatin's good."

Morton stormed out of the room in a frenzy of rage; but he had sufficient control of himself to commit no overt act. He joined his cowboys and the mystified sheriff, and with a short "We're goin'," climbed into his saddle and led the retreat back to the Box H.

"That sure was a swell job yuh did, Willy," Chick Wilson said as Old Man Parsons finished relating what had occurred. "Me an' Betty would have been on our way to the jail by this time if yuh hadn't come through for us."

"Shucks!" Willy protested, blushing. "It wasn't nothin'. I just happened to be in the kitchen when them jaspers rode into the yard, an' I reckoned it wouldn't do no good to show myself, so I just sorta holed up with

the Chink an' waited to see what would happen."

"Well, I'm glad it's all over," Betty said. Then she added happily, "With that confession thing in our possession, Morton won't dare build the dam now. We've got him where we want him."

"I wouldn't bet on it, honey," said Old Man Parsons. "Mike Morton'll dare anything. . . . Ain't I right, Chick?"

"I'm afraid yuh are," Wilson said soberly. "If I know anythin' about that cuss, he'll call for a new deal an' stack the cards!"

## CHAPTER VIII

### *A Conference with the Judge*

THE sun was just peeping over Baker Ridge as Betty Parsons and Chick Wilson turned their ponies out of the stable yard and loped down the trail in the direction of River Junction. With good luck, they would reach the county seat in time to catch the eastbound express for San Antonio, where Wilson had an appointment with Judge Carlton, and Betty was to do some shopping.

They made a handsome couple as they rode along; and as Old Man Parsons watched them go down the road he sighed half wistfully, half contentedly. He felt rather lonesome and out of sorts; but he obtained some small comfort for himself in the knowledge that of all the men who had ever courted Betty—and there had been many—Chick Wilson was the best.

The two young people were radiantly happy. It was the first time that either of them had really loved. There were no unpleasant memories; no disagreeable thoughts of what might have been. Nothing to mar their happiness, except the feud with Mike Morton, and even that seemed to be of lessening importance.

True, the Box H owner was working steadily on his dam; but it would be some weeks before the structure could be completed. Chick was going to San Antonio to take up with Judge Carlton the matter of Morton's attempt at blackmail, and also to apply for an injunction against shutting off the water.

According to Pete Blair, Old Man Parsons' attorney in Del Rio, it was an open and shut case, for in Parsons' deed it was expressly stated that the land carried full water rights to the Caswell River, and the judge would be bound to act in their favor.

Upon reaching San Antonio, Chick escorted Betty to the leading department store and then hurried down the street to keep his appointment with Judge Carlton. The latter's offices were in the Watkins Building; and Wilson was greeted by Carlton's secretary, an efficient young woman, who bade the caller be seated, and entered the inner office to announce him.

"The judge will see you in a few minutes, Mr. Wilson," she said when she presently emerged.

"Thank yuh, ma'am," bowed Chick, and, sitting down, contentedly surveyed the waiting room. It was well though not expensively furnished, and Chick decided that the judge was probably an easy-going old geezer with a sack full of money and a heart of gold. Had he been able to hear what was going on in the private office, he might have felt less complacent!

"You may go in now," the secretary said, as a buzzer informed her of the fact that the judge was no longer occupied.

"How do you do, Mr. Wilson?" Venerable, gray-haired Judge Carlton beamed benignly upon the foreman of the Lazy Y. "I'm mighty glad you were able to come over this morning. From Mr. Blair's letter, I gathered that you've a just complaint against the Box H organization; and that little matter of blackmail should prove to be very interesting. You have the documents with you, of course?"

"I sure have, sir," Chick replied, laying a flat packet, wrapped in an oilskin container, upon the table. "Yuh'll find 'em all there, sir."

Judge Carlton unwrapped the package and shuffled its contents over. When he came to Morton's confession he nodded his gray head portentously.

"Yes, Mr. Wilson," he said, tapping the paper. "This is more than interesting! What do you want to do with him?"

The closet door behind Chick noiselessly opened on a crack and a pair of narrowed eyes glared out viciously. A hand moved, groping as though reaching for a six-gun; but, after a moment, the door closed again as quietly as it had been opened.

"Nothin', Judge," Chick replied to Carlton's question. "I'll admit that we ain't got no especial affection for Morton back on the Lazy Y, but we ain't wantin' to do him no harm. At the same time, though, we want to be damn sure that he ain't goin' to be allowed to ham-string us, which is what he seems to be aimin' for. If he shuts off that river water, we won't have a cow left on its legs by the first of August. The Lazy Y will be put plumb out of business."

Judge Carlton nodded, puffed meditatively on his cigar.

"Well, now, I'll just take a look at the rest of these," he said. "Everything is here?"

"Yes, sir—everything."

Rapidly the judge glanced through the remaining papers.

"I thought you told me that all of them were here?" he said sharply, looking up.

"They are," Chick asserted.

"They are not!" the judge insisted.

"Why, what's missin'?" Chick was surprised and rather perturbed.

"You haven't filed a copy of the deed to the property, along with the power of attorney from Mr. Parsons and the petition for an injunction."

"But Mr. Blair told me it wasn't necessary," Chick objected.

"How long has Mr. Blair been running my court?" demanded the judge. "It most certainly *is* necessary, sir!"

"No offense, Judge. I didn't mean it thataway," Chick said apologetically; "but, yuh see, we spent two whole days goin' over them papers, an' I was certain we hadn't overlooked no bets."

"Well, I'm afraid you have," said Judge Carlton, "and until you file a copy of that deed, my hands are tied. I'm sorry, young man, but the law is the law. It is rigid and inflexible, and I am bound to carry it out to the very letter."

Chick nodded, ruefully enough.

"Sure, I understand that, Judge. Well, I reckon about the only thing I can do is to go back home an' get it. Let's see, today's Monday. I can come back Thursday mornin', if yuh can see me then."

The judge looked at his engagement book.

"Yes; that will be all right. Make it eleven-thirty. I suppose I might just as well keep all the documents here meanwhile," he added, piling them up together. "Then we'll have them ready to hand when we want them."

"Thank yuh, sir. I sure do appreciate yore kindness, but I reckon mebbe Mr. Blair will want to look 'em over again to make sure we ain't makin' no other slip." Before Judge Carlton could prevent it, with one swoop of his hand, Chick had gathered up the pile of papers and rewrapped them in the oilskin.

The judge smiled—not very pleasantly.

"As you will, Mr. Wilson," he agreed stiffly. "But be sure and bring them all back on Thursday."

"I sure will!" Chick laughed. "I don't know how Blair come to make that mistake—might've been pretty expensive! Well, so long, Judge, and thanks a lot."

He was to meet Betty at one o'clock for luncheon and it lacked but five minutes of the hour. Hardly had the outer door closed behind him when

the secretary stuck her head into Judge Carlton's private office.

"He's gone," she announced laconically, and withdrew, as Mike Morton emerged from the closet.

"Well, if yuh ain't the biggest mutton-head in Texas!" the Box H man exclaimed wrathfully. "I'll be a son of a she-baboon if yuh don't take all prizes for bein' dumb! Yuh had that damned paper in yore hand an' yuh let him get it back!"

"You heard the conversation," the judge defended himself lamely. "What could I do?"

"Yuh could have burned it, tore it up, swallowed it—anything, except let him get it back!"

Carlton shrugged.

"Thanks; but I'm getting along in years and I want to enjoy my health as long as possible," he said.

"Why in hell didn't yuh let me plug him while I had the chance?"

"Now listen here, Morton," said Carlton, dropping his judicial manner; "gunfightin' may go over swell down in the Caswell Valley, but it makes bad medicine here in San Antonio. We'd be in jail before the gun stopped smoking, the whole story would come out an' we'd be hung to the highest gallows in Texas. Use your brains!"

"I'd rather use my gun!" snapped Morton. "Still, I reckon yuh might be right," he conceded.

"I know damned well I'm right! But you needn't get all lathered up, Mike. Things will pan out. You heard him say he was comin' back on Thursday, didn't you?"

"Yeah; what of it?"

"Well, he has to come to River Junction for the train, doesn't he?"

"Uh-huh," said Morton, his features crinkling, as the significance of the judge's suggestion began to dawn on him.

"Well, it sure would be tough if he missed the train, wouldn't it, huh?"

Mike Morton's grin became a chuckle; the chuckle became an uproarious laugh.

"It would plumb break my heart, Judge!" he shouted, slapping his thigh. "I'd damn near cry my eyes out! Say, let's go out an' drink hearty to that one!"

## CHAPTER IX

### *Wilson Is Tricked*

IN all the Southwest there is no other hotel anything like the one which faces on Alamo Square. It stands as an oasis of leisure in a money-mad age; a picturesque bit of the old world dropped into a bustling section of the new.

There is an atmosphere of freedom from worry, a delicious sense of well-being and contentment within its thick, ivy-covered walls. It recalls the Spanish occupation of the Southwest and the lazy, wealthy days of the *ante-bellum* South.

Betty and Chick were sitting under the branches of a gnarled and twisted mulberry tree whose welcome shadow, combined with those of a giant cottonwood and several palms, shielded them from the early afternoon sun. Luncheon was long since over.

Betty was sipping a tall, cool glass of lemonade and watching the multi-colored fish swim slowly about in the crystal-clear water of the sunken oval pool, while Chick smoked and in low, unassuming tones talked of the past —and the future.

He told her of his boyhood in Montana; how he had hoped to become a mining engineer, but had been forced to leave school when his father died and go to punching cows in order to keep the little home together. He told her of his days on the range, of his adventures in Mexico, where he had "struck it rich"; and how he had had the satisfaction of seeing his mother enjoy a few restful years before she had passed on.

Betty listened, enthralled. She realized that in spite of his ability as a cattleman, in spite of his skill with guns and horses, he was, after all,

only a boy grown tall; a big, good-natured, lovable boy. A boy that she wanted to mother; but a man as well. A man who stirred her as no other man ever had; a man who would fight to protect her; a man in whom she placed implicit trust and confidence.

"I'm glad you're well off, Chick," she said shyly. "Not because money means much to me, but because no one'll be able to say you married the boss' daughter to get a stake in the ranch."

Wilson chuckled.

"Why, Betty, if yuh was a biscuit-shooter in a minin' camp hash-house, yuh'd still have every able-bodied man in the county ridin' herd on yuh!"

"I hadn't noticed any crowd standing in line—not up to now! Why, Chick, I—"

Wilson suddenly signaled for silence. He had heard a laugh which he recognized. It had filtered through the ivy-covered trellis dividing the patio into intimate little nooks.

He listened intently. For a moment all he could hear above the strumming of the guitars of the Mexican musicians who were playing a soft tango, was a confused mumble of voices. Then the music stopped and the conversation became clearly audible.

"So the old pot-bellied maverick tried to double-cross yuh, huh?" It was Slick Henderson's voice; Chick would have known it among a thousand.

Instinctively he reached for his gun and then smiled sheepishly as he realized that he was in a place where he would hardly be called upon to use it. He rose cautiously, stepped over a clump of Spanish bayonet and put his ear close to the ivy.

"Yo're damn tootin' he did!" Mike Morton's voice now, rough and acid. "An' he dang near got away with it, too! Yuh see, when Wilson came into the office, I was in the closet. After a lot of palaverin', they got down to business an' the judge said he couldn't issue no injunction until he had a certified copy of the deed to the Lazy Y.

"Wilson allowed he'd come back an' fetch it Thursday. Well, he'll have to ride the trail to River Junction. I reckon that shoulder of yores'll feel some considerable better 'long about Thursday mornin', won't it, Slick?"

Slick Henderson laughed harshly.

"I reckon so; but I don't see yet where the double-crossin' came in, Mike. Looks like the old bozo done just what yuh ordered him to."

"I'm gettin' to that. After Wilson left, I come out of the closet and give Carlton hell for lettin' him keep the papers, but the old crook bellyached about not bein' anxious to lose his health, an' suggested that we'd better get busy Thursday mornin', out where there wasn't no chance of bein' disturbed."

"Well?"

"It sounded all right, an' I'd have swallowed it if I hadn't happened to catch the old sheep-stealer lookin' kinda nervous-like at his desk. That tipped me off that there was some dirty work goin' on, so I jammed a gun in his guts an' told him to come clean or I'd bore a tunnel through the middle of him."

"The hell yuh did!"

"The hell I didn't! Well, first off he tried gettin' high-heeled an' pretendin' he didn't know what I was drivin' at; but when he seen that I meant business, he admitted he'd sneaked that confession paper outa the pile an' was plannin' to trade it for some notes I hold against him."

"The cross-eyed son of a polecat!"

"An' then some! Well, I got the paper, all right, an' burned it in his ash tray, right under his nose."

"Swell," Henderson chuckled. "But how in hell did he put that over on Wilson? That jasper wasn't whelped yesterday."

"Listen, Slick. Before Carlton went to lawin', he was the smartest poker player in Arizona. In fact, he was

just a mite too smart. That's why he ain't never been back to Yuma since. He slipped that paper out of the pile with Wilson lookin' right at him."

"Well, I'll be damned! What are yuh goin' to do to him?"

"Nothin'; that is, right now I ain't. He's too useful to me. One thing at a time, Slick. We'll finish with the Lazy Y outfit before we start anythin' else."

A hasty examination of the contents of the oilskin packet proved to Chick that the paper in question was indeed missing. For an instant he was tempted to crash through the ivy screen and have it out with the owner of the Box H. Then he realized that it would never do to create a disturbance in the hotel, especially with Betty present.

He turned to her and spoke very softly.

"Quick, Betty, we've got to get out of here pronto! Duck—an' go quiet, girl!"

They hurried across the patio, through the lobby of the hotel and, turning into Alamo Plaza, headed in the direction of the Southern Pacific station. Betty waited until they were seated on the observation platform of the Western Express before she questioned him. He gave her a brief outline of the conversation he had overheard.

"I don't know exactly what I'm goin' to do, honey," he concluded. "That is, I haven't worked out the details yet; but I kinda figure it somethin' like this." He dropped his voice and talked to her earnestly until the Pullman conductor asked them for their tickets.

Later, as they rode into the stable yard of the Lazy Y, they beheld Frisco Willy perched on the top rail of the horse corral, offering ribald advice to Red Roberts who was hazing a half-wild cow-pony.

"Slide off yore perch, Frisco, an' come over to the front porch," Chick called, after helping Betty to dismount. Old Man Parsons was already there, waiting for them.

"I'm there now, Chick." Willy climbed down, and after a final helpful word of instruction to Roberts, hurried to the house.

"How did yuh make out?" he inquired.

"I didn't. It's war, Frisco."

"Yip-ee!" yowled Willy. "Not that I'm bloodthirsty, yuh understand, folks; but I'd sure like a chance to throw down on Mike Morton or Slick Henderson, or Hornbeck—or, for that matter, 'most anybody in the Box H crowd."

"Well, cheer up, boy," Chick laughed. "Yo're goin' to get all the action yuh crave."

"When do I commence?"

"Right sudden," said Old Man Parsons. "Yo're catchin' the evenin' train for Austin. When yuh get there, hunt up Doc Reid an' tell him I sent yuh. Doc is the biggest road contractor in the state, an' he'll help us fight the devil with fire. If Morton shuts off the water, we'll blow his dam out of the river to hell-an'-gone!"

The Old Man's teeth came together with a click, his jaw set.

"An' him with it, here's hopin'," said Frisco, with deep satisfaction. "It's what we ought to have done long ago!"

## CHAPTER X

### *Frisco Willy Returns*

"I SURE wish this business was over," said Old Man Parsons to his daughter. They were sitting on the shady porch, the old man puffing his pipe while Betty polished her silver spurs.

"So do I, Dad; but perhaps it won't be so bad. After all, we've got Chick on the job, and that's something!"

"Yuh don't tell me!" The Old Man chuckled. "I reckon yuh'd rather have him with us than a dozen other punchers, now wouldn't yuh?"

"Than a thousand," she corrected

him with a quiet smile. "But you know that already."

"Speakin' of the devil," her father observed, as Chick Wilson came around the corner of the house and headed toward the porch. "What's on yore mind, boy?"

"Why, I was wonderin' what's keepin' Frisco." Chick pulled off his sombrero and dropped into a chair next to Betty. "He's been gone over a week; ought to've been back three days ago."

"You don't think anything has—" Betty began anxiously.

"No; not Frisco. That little runt can take care of himself in any company. He's crazy like a fox."

"Yo're right, Chick," Parsons nodded. "For a little feller, Willy rates mighty high. Why, he—"

A tremendous shout rising from the corral brought them all to their feet and hurrying around the corner of the house to learn what was going on.

The cowboys were perched on the rail of the horse corral, whooping and yelling at the top of their lungs. Shading his eyes with his hand, Chick looked past them. He saw a large covered wagon lumbering up from the southwest. The vehicle was a curious cross between an ordinary chuck wagon and a prairie schooner, drawn by four tired, dusty, moth-eaten mules hitched in single file and guided by an invisible driver who remained under the bonnet out of the broiling sun.

"I wonder who it is?" Betty speculated wonderingly.

"Search me," shrugged her father. "That's the first one of them things I've seen in ten years."

"Some jasper sellin' snake-oil," Chick offered. "Hi!" he shouted as the wagon came within hailing distance. "Pull up an' rest awhile."

The unseen driver paid no attention to the invitation at first. But when he reached the roadway leading to the stable yards and the corral, he hesitated as if uncertain whether he would turn in or not, and then, cracking a long, blacksnake whip, turned the leader into the drive and drove briskly toward the house.

Red Roberts, fearing a trick of some sort, unlimbered his gun and, dashing over to the wagon, peered under the bonnet.

"Frisco Willy!" he bellowed. "For the love of codfish, what are yuh doin' on that wagon?"

"Well, for one thing," Willy replied with a wry smile, "I'm raisin' the finest crop of blisters that's to be found anywheres in the Southwest! . . . Whoa there, Mussolini! Yuh've done went far enough."

"Where have yuh been?" Chick Wilson demanded.

"I've been where I was supposed to be, an' I done what I was sent to do. After I've washed up a bit, I'll give yuh the dope. Boy!" with a grandiloquent wave of his hand at Red Roberts. "Drive my war hosses into the palace yard an' unhitch 'em."

"How'd yuh like to go to hell?" Red demanded, a wide grin lighting up his features.

"Reckon hell would be a summer resort compared to the places I've been through! I hope I never have to drive no more mules long as I live!"

"By the way, Red," Chick suggested, as Roberts climbed up to the seat, "yuh'd better get the boys to help yuh unload them drums right away an' put 'em in the small shed. Go careful now!"

He hurried to the kitchen, where Betty had poured some coffee for Willy, who gulped it from his saucer and rolled himself a smoke.

"I got to Austin O. K.," Frisco began, "an' I didn't have no trouble findin' Doc Reid. He come through hootin' just as soon as he knowed that Mr. Parsons sent me, an' we hauled a load down to the freight yards, but the lousy hombre what calls himself a freight agent wouldn't ship it for us.

"We argued with him for two hours, tryin' to make it sink into his granite

dome that the damn stuff couldn't go off unless a fuse was set into it, but it wasn't no use.

"Well, there wasn't but one thing to do then, an' I done it. Them mules an' that sage-scow ain't the neatest lookin' outfit I ever drove, but they was all I could get in a hurry. Whiles we was loadin' in them drums, who should come along but Luke Sanger of the Cross O. I tried to steer him away, but he kept snoopin' around. Then he moved right sudden, an' I didn't have to be no fortune teller to know he was fixin' to get in touch with Mike Morton. They've been pals for years."

"That was a tough break," said Parsons.

"Uh-huh," Willy grunted. "Well, I figured there wasn't no use weepin' over it, so I humped myself an' got the old wagon goin'. I knowed Morton couldn't do nothin' before I got to San Antonio, so I followed the regular route that far.

"But instead of comin' through Del Rio, like they'd be expectin' me to, I drove down to Peck's Corners, crossed the Devil River there an' come up on the west side until I was opposite Jim Crowley's place. Then I crossed back to our side an' hit out for the ranch."

"An' a swell bit of work it was," said Old Man Parsons. "I'm mighty proud of yuh for puttin' it through, Willy."

"It wasn't nothin," Willy said modestly, blushing under his bronzed skin. "I'll admit I've rid more comfortable, but what the hell? It's all part of the game."

The Old Man was very thoughtful. For several moments he chewed the stem of his cold pipe in frowning silence.

"What's bothering you, Dad?" Betty wanted to know.

He spat at a grasshopper before answering:

"Plenty. If Morton knows we've got powder here, I reckon he ain't goin' to think it's to celebrate the Fourth of July."

"Yo're right,' said Chick. "I've been thinkin' the same thing. Morton won't be in no doubt whatever as to what we're aimin' to do. Well," he added, "now's the time for the showdown! He'll either have to leave our water alone or prepare for hell, an' plenty of it—an' he knows it!"

## CHAPTER XI

### *The First Warning*

FRISCO WILLY was having a nightmare. A large platter of ham and beans, which in some mysterious manner had taken a sort of quasi-human form and was armed with a pair of business-like six-guns, had backed him into a corner of the bunkhouse and was forcing him to dance.

At first Willy had refused, but after a slug had thudded into the floor uncomfortably close to his feet, he had conceded defeat and danced with great agility. He went through every step in his somewhat limited repertory; but his tormentor was not easily satisfied, and after hailing in two confederates in crime—a gigantic cup of coffee with evil, distorted features and a determined-looking slab of mince pie, armed with a fearsome case knife—commanded Willy to shake things up faster.

Around and around went the unhappy cowboy, swinging arms and legs for all he was worth. The pace was beginning to tell on him. He was getting very dizzy. He tried to stop, but his enemy would not let him. His speed increased. His head was swimming frightfully and he had a horrible feeling of nausea.

He pleaded with Ham and Beans, who looked strangely like Morton, to let him stop, but the ruffian only jeered and waved a gun in a threatening manner. He appealed to Coffee and to Mince Pie, and they laughed at him.

He urged himself on to a final desperate effort. On and on, stamping, spinning, whirling; his head was go-

ing around faster than he was. His stomach was pitching and tossing like a bucking bronco, and his knees were wobbling shakily. He couldn't go on—he couldn't! He tried to run away, but in an effort to dodge his tormentors he staggered dizzily across the bunkhouse floor, sank to his knees and fell headlong. Then the lights went out—and he woke up in a cold, dripping sweat.

"Great Gawd, that was awful!" he mumbled to himself miserably. One of his blankets was on the floor; the other was wound tightly about his shoulders. "If I ever pack away another meal like that one I hope somebody shoots me before I get to bed! An' what in hell did I want to drink all that redeye for?"

His head ached, his tongue felt like a piece of dry flannel in his mouth. He wanted a drink of water, and he wanted it right away.

There was plenty of water to be had—out at the pump; but that meant leaving his warm bunk and walking fifty yards in the chill night air. Frisco shivered at the thought, and pulled the blankets up over his head. These tactics, however, did not seem to quench his thirst; so, groaning, he climbed out on the floor, struggled into overalls and a pair of boots and started for the pump.

A blast of cold air seemed to chill him to the marrow as he opened the bunkhouse door, and for a moment he wavered; but the sight of the pump, with the tin cup on its top glistening in the moonlight, decided him. He just had to have some water! He took another step and stopped again, blinking at a dim object that was moving furtively in the shadow of the big barn.

"Now what in blazes—" He pinched himself to make sure that he was not having another nightmare and strained his eyes across the darkness. The object moved again, and now he made it out plainly. It was the figure of a man crouching low as he crept stealthily along the sheltered side of the barn.

Instinctively, Willy reached for his gun and swore silently when he realized that he was not wearing his belt. He stepped back into the bunkhouse, pulled down a Winchester from the rack behind the door and dashed into the yard.

The intruder, still keeping in the broad band of shadow, was running swiftly across the end of the yard toward a horse which stood at the edge of the road.

Instantly, Willy decided upon his course of action.

"Stand an' stick 'em up!" he bellowed.

A spurt of orange flame, a thundering crash and a splintered door panel dangerously close to his head was the answer he received. The runty cowboy dropped to one knee and trained his rifle upon the fleeing man. As unhurried and cool as if he were firing at a range target, Willy squeezed the trigger. A staccato crack, a whine of lead, followed by a horrible cry, and the running figure crumpled to the ground and lay still.

In the bunkhouse, pandemonium broke loose. Half a dozen sleepy-eyed cowboys tumbled from their bunks, all yelling at once as they groped around in the dark for their clothing.

"Lights," commanded Red Roberts. "Somebody get a light!"

"Lights, hell! We don't want no light."

"What's goin' on?"

"It's Willy started somethin'. Willy! Hi, Willy! Where are yuh?"

But Willy was crawling cautiously over the ground in the direction of the fallen man. Too old a hand was he to run the risk of getting shot if the fellow were playing possum! A hundred feet from the intruder, he stopped and aimed a second shot at a point about two feet beyond the crumpled body. The bullet churned up some bits of grass, but the figure never stirred.

"Reckon I got him for keep the first time," Willy nodded to himself; "else-

wise that second shot would have had him yelpin' for mercy. Serves him right anyways, whoever he is!" Abandoning caution, he stood upright and hurried across the yard, bending to scrutinize the features of the dead man, a half-breed who had been riding for the Box H.

With a grunt, half of pity, half of satisfaction, Willy turned and headed back to the bunkhouse.

"What was the shootin' for?" Chick Wilson shouted, coming across the yard on the run.

"Why, I was goin' for a drink of water when I happened to spot that hombre sneakin' past the barn," explained Willy, with a jerk of his thumb toward the erstwhile Box H puncher. "When I hollered to him to stop he throwed down on me. That was the first shot yuh heard. Then I let him have it; that was the second one."

By this time Betty and Old Man Parsons had joined Chick and the cowboys. Willy addressed his employer.

"Well, Mister Parsons, I reckon I knowed what I was talkin' about when I told yuh that war had started. Believe me, if I was yuh, I wouldn't wait no longer. I'd get goin', pronto! Am I right, Chick?"

Chick shrugged, but made no reply; and there was a moment of silence that was fairly audible with protest and discontent. Then Old Man Parsons brought his teeth together with a determined click.

"Well, boys, I reckon I've been playin' the old woman right along in this business, so I s'pose I might as well go the whole hog an' change my mind! Morton knows we've got the powder here, all right; that's why he sent that breed down. We're makin' our next move before he makes his!"

There was a suppressed whoop of delight from the punchers as Parsons continued:

"I reckon yuh all know what we're up against, so I won't waste time explainin' that; but there are certain matters that—"

"Dad!" screamed Betty, and grabbed her father by the arm. "Look! The barn's on fire!"

There was no doubt of it. From a window at the far corner of the big, sprawling structure drifted an undulating spiral of smoke; a tongue of red flame licked after it and a faint ruddy glow shone out into the yard. The barn was on fire, and only a flimsy partition separated it from the shed where had been stored the metal drums which Frisco Willy had brought from Austin!

Chick Wilson was the first of the group to recover his presence of mind.

"The powder!" he shouted, and dashed toward the barn at a dead run with Frisco Willy at his heels.

## CHAPTER XII

### *Ready for Battle*

SWIFTLY Chick and Frisco slid open the big front doors, but one glance at the blazing timbers along the back wall was enough to convince the Lazy Y foreman that it would be hopeless to attempt to put out the fire.

"Close 'em, Willy!" he roared. "Don't let's give it no more draught than we have to." He whirled on the others.

"Our only chance is to get the powder out of the shed before it catches! . . . Buck, hitch up them mules to the big wagon an' back it as near as yuh can to the door. . . . Red, yuh an' Soapy get Winchesters, an' keep yore eyes peeled. I ain't aimin' to have no Box H gunmen light down on us whiles we're busy luggin' out the powder. The rest of us'll snake the cans outa the shed an' roll 'em up on the wagon."

Betty helped Jordan hitch up, and but half a dozen drums had been removed from the doomed building by the time the ancient prairie schooner had been backed into place.

"You go help the boys, Buck," Betty urged. "I can hold these mules all right; go along!"

Jordan, moving faster than anyone had ever seen him move before, went to the aid of his fellow cowpunchers, while Betty jammed on the old-fashioned brake and talked soothingly to the frightened and restless mules.

A desperate race was in progress against the onrushing flames which roared and crackled as they ate their way through the well seasoned timbers of the big barn. Chick had organized a sort of human chain in the smaller building, and had himself selected the post of greatest danger, next to the piles of drums.

Then came Frisco Willy, Old Man Parsons, Slim Hartman, Patsy Clark, Ching Lee, and on the end, Buck Jordan, who used his bull-like strength to superb advantage in rolling the powder drums up the incline and placing them in the wagon.

Pushing and grunting, they passed the heavy drums along. The men were giving all they had. Sweat poured out of them, their backs ached, and their arms became strained and weary; but they kept at it, grimly realizing that the very existence of the Lazy Y was the stake for which they were competing against the roaring fire which was fast devouring the adjoining building.

About half of the powder had been removed, when there was a rumble, followed by a splintering crash, as the roof of the main barn fell in, sending a spout of flame shooting skyward, surmounted by a huge sheaf of sparks.

"Watch the roof of the shack!" Betty shouted, as from her point of vantage on the wagon box, she beheld the flaming shower descend upon the top of the small building in which the men were working.

"Me fix him!" Ching Lee yelled. He sped across the yard and vanished into the kitchen, reappearing the next moment with two tin pails and a floor mop. Filling the pails at the horse trough, he scurried back to the shed. Willing hands boosted him to its roof, and passed his equipment up after him.

It was well that Ching Lee got there when he did, for already half a dozen small fires were breaking out. These he quickly extinguished, but at the expense of his entire supply of water. He howled for more. Soapy Dixon, deciding that Red was capable of doing sentry duty alone, dropped his rifle and rushed to the help of the Chinese.

With sparks descending about him in a fiery rain, the first thing Ching did upon receiving a bucket from Soapy was to douse himself from head to foot. After this temporary fire-proofing, he scrambled up and down the gently sloping roof, smothering out as many of the sparks as possible, and aided considerably by Dixon, who, having pressed additional pails into use, was furnishing a fairly adequate supply of water.

But even with Ching Lee's assistance, the men in the shack realized that they were running a losing race against the fire. The crackle and roar were momentarily increasing. Smoke began to pour through the cracks in the partition; the wall would soon be a mass of white-hot flame.

Chick had, of course, foreseen this and had, accordingly, removed the powder from that side of the shed first, but he knew that once the flames broke through the wall, the heat would drive the men from the shack, if, indeed, the roof didn't cave in on top of them.

He was straining every muscle to the breaking point, and the men behind him, taking up the count much like the members of a varsity crew following the lead of the stroke oar, increased their tempo. Two-thirds of the powder had been gotten out, but there were still twenty drums of it

to be pulled and tugged to the wagon and safety.

Twenty drums! Chick realized that it was hopeless. Well, at least they could continue a bit longer and then make a dash for safety. They could—but no! A brilliant idea, born of desperation, flashed across his mind.

"All out!" he shouted. "All out—an' make it snappy!"

The men stared in surprise. The fire had not yet eaten through the wall, and it wasn't like Chick to show the white feather. They couldn't understand it, and they hesitated. But when he bawled his order a second time, they hustled out of the shack.

"Come down off the roof!" Chick roared at Ching Lee.

The cook needed no urging; he had had enough of his fiery shower bath; already he had been uncomfortably singed.

"Willy," Chick continued, "jump on that wagon with Betty an' drive over back of the horse corral. Lively, now! I'm goin' up on the roof, an' I want the rest of yuh hombres to swing a couple of them drums up to me. An' make it right sudden, 'cause we ain't got no idle time hangin' on our hands!"

He didn't give them a chance to argue; the words were hardly out of his mouth before he was climbing to the roof, and a moment later he was shouting for the powder. The combined efforts of Ching Lee, Old Man Parsons, and Buck Jordan were necessary to swing the drums up to him. He yelled with satisfaction as the first one appeared over the edge; and, when the second one was hoisted, he managed, after a dogged struggle, to place them together about ten feet from the low ridge-pole.

"For the love of God, come down out of there!" the Old Man implored, as a tongue of flame thrust through the side wall of the shack.

"I'm on my way, Dad!" Chick yelled back. "Beat it for the other side of the ranch house. All hell's goin' to bust loose here in a minute!"

"We stick here until yuh come down!" the Old Man told him grimly. "An' we— Jumpin' Judas! Are yuh loco?"

With fascinated gaze, he watched as the foreman unscrewed the cap of one of the drums, and, picking up a blazing brand, shoved the unlighted end into the powder.

"Yow—ee!" he shouted. "Here I come!" Feet first, he slid down the charring roof, bounded up like a rubber ball before he had fairly touched the ground, and dashed after the others, who were already well on their way to the ranch house.

They had barely gained the shelter of the building when there was a livid blaze of light, followed by a long-drawn hissing, as the open drum of powder ignited and flared like a gigantic star shell.

"I'll bet they saw that in River Junction!" Chick observed, cheerfully nonchalant, while the others stared at him as if he were a madman.

"Well, I don't—" Old Man Parsons was beginning dubiously, but his voice was drowned out by a violent explosion, as the second drum of powder on the roof split its seams and belched forth a spouting torrent of fire and smoke.

"Lucky we're behind the house!" Chick chuckled, as ragged chunks of iron spattered heavily on the roof. "But that ain't nothin'; wait until the big one goes!"

"It won't be long now!" Soapy muttered. "I'm bettin' yuh—"

A tremendous burst of orange flame shot into the inky blackness of the sky and was followed instantly by a deafening blast which seemed to rock the solid earth itself. It burst every window pane in the house, and would have hurled the cowhands to the ground, had they not already been lying prone.

The air was filled with blazing

brands, acrid with the pungent odor of burning powder, and even at that distance, the men coughed and gasped for breath, while iron fragments beat a terrible tattoo upon the ranch house.

For a few minutes, all lay perfectly still. Then, when the menacing patter of metal on the roof ceased, Chick sprang up and, running to the far side of the house, shouted to Frisco.

"Hi, Willy! Betty an' yuh all right?"

"Sure as shootin', Chick, an' we had a grandstand seat for the show yuh put on! But what in hell's it all about?"

"An' that's what I'd like to know, too," Old Man Parsons chimed in.

"I'll tell yuh in a little while," returned Chick, "but just now I reckon we'd better get busy with pails an' mops on the roof of the house here, unless yuh want to have another fire on yore hands. I don't reckon that hot iron an' whatever is doin' it any good."

His advice was excellent, for already the roof was smoldering in a number of places. All the pails on the ranch were put into action, and headed by Chick, who swung a mop while he directed the others, the Lazy Y cowmen extinguished the embers and then gave the roof a thorough soaking in order to prevent any further fires from breaking out.

"It didn't take a prophet to figure that we'd never have time to get all the powder outa the shack," Chick explained a little later; so, as long as we were bound to have an explosion, I thought we'd better have a real one—the kind that'd do us some good. I knew dang well that the Box H hands, an' mebbe even the chief polecat himself, was up in the hills somewhere watchin' the results o' that half-breed's dirty work, an' hopin' for the worst.

"We'd already fetched all the powder outa the shack that we was goin' to need. So I figured that if we put on a real giddy show, Morton might be fooled into thinkin' he'd won the hand. Anyways, he wouldn't look for no trouble from us tonight, an' if we hopped right to it, we could catch him nappin' an' blow his dam to hell-an'-gone before he ever knowed what struck him."

"By the sacred toes of the Queen of Sheba, yo're right!" Frisco bellowed, jumping to his feet, while the others vociferated wild approval. "Boy, yuh sure thought plenty fast! An' now that Morton's fired the first round, I'm for cleanin' him up quick an' for keeps."

Hearty cheers greeted this sentiment, but Old Man Parsons quieted the men with a motion of his hand.

"Yeah; we'll do the job tonight," he said, "but there's goin' to be plenty of lead flyin' before mornin', an' I ain't askin' any man to mess with it for cowpoke wages. Any of yuh that wants yore time is free to get it—an' no hard feelin's.

"But here's my proposition. If we come through on top, I'm givin' five hundred bucks to every man in the outfit—includin' the Chink. If we don't—well, then, I reckon the Lazy Y will be about washed up an' a few of us'll be missin'. How about it?"

"We're stickin'," said Red Roberts. "All of us," he added, as nodding heads confirmed his statement. "An' if things pan out an' yuh want to blow us handsome, that's all right, but we're with yuh anyways, as long as there's any fightin' to be done. When do we commence?"

"Right away," the owner of the Lazy Y replied. "An' now, as I've promised Chick I'd let him handle this shindy, I'm turnin' command over to him; an' I'm askin' yuh all to follow his lead."

The men assented eagerly. They knew Wilson, knew that he could be depended upon to have a workable plan, if any plan could prove workable against the uneven strength in man power; for Morton had twenty-

five men available at once, and twice that number to fall back on if necessary.

"Well, now, here's what we're aimin' to do," Chick began. "Slim, yuh an' Soapy an' Buck an' Red are to ride up through the notch, then dismount an' sneak down to the fence. Crawl under it an' keep movin' along until yuh can hole up an' train yore rifles on where yuh reckon the dam is. Stick tight, an' don't do nothin' unless yuh hear shootin' goin' on below. If that starts, pour plenty of hot lead down on top of the dam. Yuh'll be sure to get a few Box H jaspers if yuh keep it up long enough.

"Patsy, yuh high-tail it up to Hadly's Gulch. If any riders come through, plug as many as yuh can with one magazineful of shells. Then ride like hell for the ranch house, 'cause if yo're ketched, Morton'll have yuh boiled in tar.

"Me an' Willy'll take the wagon up the west side of the river until we get near the gorge. Then we'll drive it up the river bottom—it'll be dry on the sides—an' we'll plant the powder under the wing of the dam. When she goes off, there won't be nothin' left but a heap of steel an' sand!"

"How about me?" Old Man Parsons demanded.

Chick looked solemn.

"Yo're headin' up the home guard."

"I am like hell!" the Old Man exploded indignantly.

"Somebody's got to," said Chick. "I wouldn't wonder if Morton would send some of his hellions round to burn the rest of the place, once the ruckus starts, an' I'm countin' on yuh an' Betty an' the Chink—an' Patsy, if he gets back—to keep 'em from gettin' away with it."

Actually, it was the last thing that Chick figured was likely to occur; for he knew that if shooting once started, Morton would be too busy defending the dam even to think about the Lazy Y.

But he realized that Parsons was in no condition to take part in a fight; and although Betty had pleaded to be allowed to accompany him when he had outlined his plan to her on the train, he had promptly vetoed the idea. Now he was trying to insure that both of them should remain out of danger.

After outlining the scheme for the second time, to make certain that everyone understood exactly what he was to do, Chick dissolved the conference and the men hurried to the bunkhouse for their rifles and other equipment.

"Promise me yuh'll not be reckless," Betty pleaded, when she and Chick were alone for a few minutes.

"I promise yuh that I won't take no unnecessary chances," he evaded her. "I ain't no more anxious to get killed than yuh are to have me, but that dam has to go!"

"I know, but—but, oh, Chick—if you shouldn't come back—" A sudden sob rose in her throat.

"There now, girl," he soothed her gently. "They say a feller who's born to be hung don't need to fear no bullet, so I ain't got nothin' to worry about. I'll be back, don't yuh fret. An' yuh an' me—"

"Fer the love of salt mack'rel!" Frisco Willy bellowed from the stable yard. "Hire somebody a guitar to sing it to her, boy! Yuh an' me's got business to attend to!"

Chick snickered, Betty giggled and Old Man Parsons let out a roar of laughter. Chick vaulted the porch railing and strode over to the wagon.

## CHAPTER XIII

### *The Courage of Betty*

IT was well after midnight when Frisco Willy turned the mules off the trail and headed them for the Caswell River. He and Chick Wilson were riding on the springless seat of the battered old prairie schooner. Timmy and Sam—the latter being

Willy's pony—their reins fastened to the back of the wagon, cantered along behind, mortified at being forced to take the mules' dust.

"Reckon we'd better leave our broncs here," Chick said, as Willy pulled up the mules at the river bank.

"Sure," Frisco agreed.

The two men got down, untied the horses and led them into a thicket of scrub oak and aspen.

"Now climb on the seat, Willy, an' start them mules down the bank," Chick directed. "I reckon this here is as good a place as any to get to the river bed. I'll try to brake the wagon with a pick handle."

Willy started to mount the seat, but had barely reached it when the mules suddenly went into action. Down the bank they galloped, pulling the wagon as if it had been a go-cart. Chick sprawled into a clump of mesquite, while Willy, cursing as only an enraged puncher can, was getting the ride of his life.

The old wagon swayed from side to side, and for a moment it seemed certain that it must topple over; but Frisco drove with skill, and luckily the wheels did not hit a boulder. The bed of the stream being reached, the mules reduced their wild gait. The animals finally stopped when their leader braced his hoofs in the mud and dipped his muzzle into the shallow stream of water which trickled along the middle of the channel.

Frisco was still cursing when Wilson walked up to the wagon.

"Boy," said Chick in whole-hearted admiration, "I've heard fine an' fancy cussin' in my time, but yuh've got a brand that skunks 'em all! I'll bet my saddle there ain't a colonel in the whole United States Army that can beat yuh at it!"

Willy grinned beatifically.

"Well, here we are," he said, "an' no harm done. The straw we piled around them drums kept 'em from jouncin' together; but them lousy sons of jackasses sure do get my goat! When I want 'em to hump, they hardly move a-tall, an' when they oughta take it easy they act like locoed rabbits."

"The dam's about half a mile upstream," Chick said. "I'm goin' to see what's doin'. Probably most of them jaspers'll be back at Morton's bunkhouse by now, but there's sure to be some sort o' guard posted, an' I aim to get him outa the way without makin' a row if I can. Stick here until I come back, unless yuh hear shootin'. In that case, come on up hell-bent for election."

"O. K. I'll get them hyenas runnin' again if I have to build a fire under 'em. Wonder how the boys is makin' out?"

"Reckon they managed to get holed up without bein' discovered. Leastwise, I ain't heard no gunplay."

"Golly, I sure wasn't made for wagon work," Willy grumbled. "I'm stiff an' sore as a schoolma'am after her first day on a hoss. Reckon I'll stretch a bit."

Frisco leaped for the ground, but in the darkness he did not see the sag of one of the lines, and his right spur caught in the slack. His right leg pulled back, doubled under him and he landed with the whole weight of his body on it. He felt something snap and a smothered groan burst from his lips.

"Great Gawd, Willy! What have yuh done?"

"Busted my leg, I reckon. She sure feels that away," he mumbled, biting off another groan as he tried to move the injured member. "If I ain't the damndest fool that ever lived! I'd ought to be took out an'—"

"Shut up an' let me look at it," Chick commanded. He bent over and made a hasty examination. "Yep, she's busted for a fact, Willy. That finishes yuh for the night."

"It does like hell! Fix a splint for it, can't yuh? I'll drive them mules if it's the last thing I ever do. Be a good feller, Chick! Come on."

Willy was almost tearful in his pleading, but Chick shook his head.

"Not a chance, boy; it just can't be done. Yuh lay still whiles I tie this up, an' then yuh can ride back to the house an' send Ching Lee to take yore place."

While Willy was groaning and grumbling his futile protests, Chick scrambled up the bank and cut a couple of stout oak sticks. Returning to his stricken companion, he trimmed the wood to suit his purpose and soon had a pair of splints. Then he ripped off his shirt and cut it into strips.

"I'll have to do this job in the dark, Willy; it wouldn't be wise to show a light. When yuh get back to the house, phone to town for Doc Barkley. I reckon there'll be plenty for him to do by mornin', anyway."

Having satisfied himself that the improvised splint would serve until Frisco reached the ranch house, Chick slung the runty cowpoke over his shoulder and climbed back to the horses. With some difficulty he got Willy into the saddle.

"Take it easy," he cautioned. "Remember, yuh ain't ridin' in no steeplechase. Yore job is to get to the house an' send me the Chink. He can drive good enough, an' he's got plenty of guts. Tell him to stay here with the wagon until I come back, unless he hears shootin'; an' in that case he's to haze them mules up the river bottom as fast as he can. Savvy?"

"Yeah, I savvy, all right, Chick; but—"

"But nothin'. I'll wait here about half an hour before startin' upstream. Now, get goin'."

He slapped Sam's flank with his sombrero and the horse started back toward the ranch house at a swift lope before Willy had a chance to raise any further objections. Chick sat on the ground and listened to the muffled sound of the animal's hoofs on the dusty trail He didn't dare smoke, and the waiting in the dark made him restless and impatient.

When he judged that approximately half an hour had passed, he got to his feet and started cautiously upstream. The moon had long since sunk, and in the narrow gorge of the Caswell River the night was as black as pitch. In places the going was soft and slippery, while in others the ground was dry and studded with boulders and countless small stones that had been washed smooth.

Presently the dam loomed up in front of him. It was as if he could feel, rather than see, its bulk. And then he heard low voices. He couldn't make out the words, but he had no difficulty in locating two men on the top of the dam, close to the east bank of the river.

Chick knew that the slightest noise would betray his presence; but somehow he must get close enough to disarm those guards and prevent them from giving the alarm. With meticulous care, he slowly worked his way up the steeply shelving bank to the top of the dam.

There he paused for a moment in order to get his second wind. He could hear the men plainly now. They were but a few feet away, and he grinned to himself as he heard them grumbling over being made to stand a useless watch. Presently he slipped his guns from their holsters and stepped softly forward.

"Up with 'em, gents, an' make it fast!" he snapped. "I ain't foolin'."

For an instant the men were too startled to move.

"Pronto!" Chick's command cracked out like a whip, and the two Box H guards raised their hands obediently.

"That's plumb sensible of yuh. If yo're quiet, yuh won't get hurt; but the first jasper that let's out a yip is goin' to be drilled plumb center. Unhitch yore gunbelts, an' don't try no monkey business unless yuh want a dose of lead poisonin'."

A stealthy figure crept through the scrub timber above the dam. Harris, the third member of the guard, who

had strolled away a few minutes before Chick climbed the bank, was returning. He had been on the point of hailing his companions when Wilson had stuck them up.

So intent was Harris upon making a sure thing of his shot that he failed to watch the ground as closely as he should have and stepped on a loose rock which turned under his weight and threw him heavily. As he fell he flashed his gun and a bullet ripped through the fleshy part of Chick's right arm.

Chick wheeled and fired two shots into the brush, but neither of them took effect. Then he leaped from the top of the dam to the side of the ravine, for he knew that his own men, holed up on the west side of the river above the dam, would open fire at once. And there were the other guards to be reckoned with as well.

Nor did he jump a second too soon. A hail of lead swept across the dam. One of the guards fell with a bullet in his side. The other toppled over, drilled through the head, uttering a wild cry as he plunged to his death upon the sharp rocks below.

Chick scrambled down the side of the ravine and started down the river bed at a fast pace, to hurry up Ching Lee with the wagon. His wound was bleeding rather freely, but in his excited condition he didn't notice it. It was a case of now or never; none knew better than he that his only chance of success was to get the wagon in place and explode the powder before the main body of Box H men could arrive on the scene and swing into action.

He had covered about two hundred yards when he heard a rattle and clatter in front of him, and a few moments later the mules and the rickety old wagon loomed out of the darkness.

"Whoopee!" Chick shouted. "We've sure started somethin' now, an' we're goin' to finish it! Head 'em straight for the dam, Ching!" He made a flying leap for the tail-board, while the wagon jounced and bounced on its mad journey up the river bed.

"Chinaman, yuh sure can drive!" he called out admiringly as he hunched himself in between two of the powder drums, the better to keep from being flung off the wagon.

"Hurrah for China!" an excited, almost hysterical voice called back.

"Betty! Good God! What are yuh doing here?" Dumbfounded, he struggled to his feet and began crawling over the powder drums toward the seat in front.

"Driving," Betty told him. Leaning forward, she cracked the whip in an effort to get more speed out of the already galloping mules. "Driving like the very devil!"

"Stop 'em, Betty!" he commanded. "Stop 'em, I tell yuh!" All his anxiety to blow up the dam had vanished, and he was thinking only of the girl's safety.

She cracked her whip again, and *yip-yipped* shrill encouragement to the fast-moving animals.

"Had too hard a time starting 'em, Chick," she laughed. "But now they're started, we're going on to the finish—just as you said!"

## CHAPTER XIV

### *Raging Waters*

IT was useless to argue with her. Excited she might be, but she was cool and determined, too.

"I was on the porch when Frisco rode up," she explained rapidly. "While Father and Ching Lee were taking him into the house I hopped into his saddle and here I am."

"Why did you do it?" Chick demanded helplessly. "Oh, Betty, why?"

"Perhaps you've forgotten it, but Ching has only one eye, and he can't get around very quickly in the dark."

"What a fool I am!" groaned Chick. "Yo're right; I *had* forgotten it."

"Well, someone had to come, so I decided it was up to me. And I'm going to see it through, too!"

"All right, then," he said grimly. "But yuh'll have to obey my orders, an' on the dot, too. Here we are at the wall. Get the wagon as close to it as yuh can. That's the stuff!" he complimented, as Betty skilfully swung the mules and managed to back the wagon almost flush against the dam. "Now let's go!"

Betty jumped down, unhitched the mules and started them downstream by the elementary process of booting the hind one. Then she climbed back and sidled lithely between the powder drums.

Meanwhile, Chick had dragged an extra plank from the wagon and slanted it from the tail-board to the ground.

"Think yuh can shift them drums without strainin' yoreself?" he asked anxiously.

"I reckon I can shove 'em along, all right."

"Then start 'em comin'. Be careful, an' don't hurt yoreself; but we'll have to work mighty fast."

He had to shout to make himself heard above the crackling of the rifles. Already the advance guard of the Box H men had ridden up and were trying to make their way to a point on the river bank below the dam, in order that they might fire down upon Betty and Chick; but, for the moment, the deadly barrage from the Lazy Y rifles prevented them from reaching their objective.

As Betty slid the drums to the back of the wagon Chick eased them down the inclined plank and rolled them in position against the dam. It was hard, back-breaking work, and to Betty and Chick — fighting against time — it seemed as if they were moving at a snail's pace.

They were dripping with perspiration. Their shoulders ached, and their hands were bruised and bleeding; but they carried on. About half the drums were unloaded when a fusillade of shots churned up the mud about the wagon. The Box H men had succeeded in crossing the Lazy Y's line of fire and were now below the dam and in a position to rake the entire river bottom with burning lead.

No time was wasted in conversation. Betty and Chick increased their efforts and quickly slid half a dozen more drums to the ground. Chick swore as a bullet creased his cheek.

"Chick!" the girl cried out sharply. "Are you hurt much?"

"Only a scratch, Betty. Keep movin'."

Another drum slid down the incline. Then a sudden hail of lead descended from almost directly above them. Chick made a lunge for Betty, and, catching her in his arms, pulled her under the wagon as bullets whined through the air and plunked into the soggy earth or ricocheted from the rocks.

"No use tryin' to move any more, Betty," Chick panted. "Those buzzards can give us hell now, an' plenty of it. Some of 'em are down below the dam, but most of 'em seem to have high-tailed it across, an' they're between us an' our own boys. Golly, that's too close for comfort!"

A vicious volley ripped through the canvas top of the old prairie schooner, pinged against the metal powder containers, and splintered the wooden sides and flooring.

"A couple more like that," said Chick grimly, "an' we'll be blowed higher than Haley's comet! Honey, we've got to run for it. Get started! I'll be right along after yuh."

Obediently, the girl scrambled out from under the wagon. Chick waited until he judged that she was about a hundred yards down the gorge; then he struck a match and tossed it into the straw. As the wisps caught and burst into flame, he turned and sped down the muddy river bed, ducking and jumping from side to side as he ran. Lead whined all about him. A bullet scorched his hand; another grazed his thigh. But he raced furiously on.

Behind him, he could hear the rifle

fire increase, and he knew that the entire Box H force had entered the battle. And he didn't care. He was exultant. The straw-packed wagon was blazing fiercely. In another minute the powder would ignite and then the dam would go. They couldn't stop it now! Nothing could stop it now!

"Betty!" he shouted, as he rounded a bend in the stream.

"Here I am, Chick, waiting for you!"

"Don't stop—keep right on runnin'!" he yelled urgently. "Cut across an' head up the west bank. The dam'll go any second now!" His voice sounded oddly faint and far-off in his own ears; his feet, as he ran, seemed strangely heavy and dragging.

Betty turned toward the bank, Chick at her heels. But he had hardly taken three strides before a sick giddiness seized him. The darkness seemed to swoop down on him, like some huge sable monster. He stumbled, staggered and pitched forward into a yawning black gulf that closed over his head.

When he opened his eyes Betty was bending over him.

"Chick! What is it? What's the matter? Oh, Chick—you're badly hurt! You—"

"I'm all right," he mumbled thickly. "Must've stumbled over something." But when he tried to rise his head spun dizzily and his knees refused to support him. He sank back weakly.

"Can't make it, Betty," he gasped. "Run for it, girl. Run!"

"Chick, try—try again! Oh, Chick, you've got to!"

"Don't wait for me," he pleaded. "Run—I'll be along!"

"I won't leave you. Whichever way we go, we go together! I'll help you, dear. Take hold of me. We've got to reach the bank!"

She got her arms under him, tugged frantically. He gritted his teeth, fought back the wave of faintness that threatened to overwhelm him again and dragged himself to his feet.

Their arms locked around each other's shoulders, now crawling on hands and knees, now tottering for a few erratic steps, they staggered toward the side of the ravine.

Chick was only partly conscious and hung almost limp on Betty's arm. A slight flesh wound in her own shoulder throbbed and ached, and every step she took was agony, but she still held on grimly and fought her way forward foot by foot.

Suddenly, a tremendous hissing sound rose above the staccato crackling of the rifles. It was followed by an ear-splitting roar; and, while the thunderous echoes beat back from the hills, there came a rumbling, grumbling, cracking sound . . . a roar . . . a mighty splash. The dam had given way.

Struggling desperately, Betty and Chick had reached the side of the gorge; but hardly had they begun the upward climb when the torrent roared around the bend at express train speed.

"Hold on, Betty! Hold on for yore life!"

Chick, partially revived, threw a protecting arm around the girl, and they clung to a scrub pine that grew out of the side of the ravine. But only for a moment were they able to hold on. Then the seething mass of water hit them and, as easily as if they had clutched a straw, wrenched them loose and sent them whirling downstream on the crest of the flood.

The mere effort to avoid being sucked down beneath the surface of the raging water cost them a precious amount of their fast waning strength. Their only hope was that they might be able to keep afloat until the torrent carried them beyond the steep, canyon-like sides of the river and washed them up on one of the sloping banks or dropped them in a shallow backwash. But Chick knew that there was only an outside chance of such good fortune occurring; any second they might be dashed against a boulder and instantly killed.

The first rush of the water had passed beyond them, but they were still being carried along at a tremendous pace. Something struck sharply against Chick. With his free hand, he reached out blindly. His fingers closed on a rough, splintered piece of wood; it was part of a floor board which had been blown from the wagon.

Instinctively, he clung to it. It wasn't much, but it helped to support him, helped him to keep Betty's head above the water. She was no longer swimming; her hands had ceased to move, and but for him she must have sunk.

And he was growing weaker; his strength was ebbing fast. The pain in his shoulder seemed to have eased. He could hardly feel the throb in his arm. But the loss of blood had sapped his vitality; he was failing—and he knew it.

The human body can stand just so much punishment, and Chick Wilson's, weakened by his wounds and his tremendous exertions, could stand no more. Slowly, his grasp began to relax, his arms moved more feebly. A wave washed over his mouth, set him choking and gasping.

Frantically, he sought to regain his strength by sheer power of will—no use! His head went under. With bursting lungs, he fought to the air once more. Another froth-crested wave splashed over him. He went down again. His fingers loosed their hold upon the plank.

And this time he sank like a stone, dragging the girl with him.

## CHAPTER XV

### *A New Enemy*

IT was fortunate for them both that Betty recovered consciousness when the cold water closed over her head. Chick still had his arm around her, and as she bobbed up to the surface she drew him with her. A brief respite from the savage buffeting of the current enabled her to slip his head into the crook of her left arm, to keep his mouth above the surface.

A turn in the course of the river sent the current whirling over toward the shallow west bank, where the ground sloped gently up from the water's edge.

It was a matter of only twenty feet, but to Betty it seemed like twenty miles. Twice she missed her stroke and her head went under; another time Chick's head almost slipped from her arm, but she managed to get a firmer hold on him just in time.

Finally, she felt the ooze of the muddy bottom, and, bracing her foot against a rough edge of rock, rested for a moment. The water churned and foamed past her, but the savagery of its rush had lessened and she could stand against it. Chick, his feet pointing downstream, rode like a boat at anchor at ebb tide. The knowledge that he was still breathing, that she might yet save him, nerved her for the task of getting him ashore.

Using her right leg as if it were a punting pole, Betty propelled herself toward the low bank, pulling Chick's unconscious form after her. When the water came only to her waist, she shoved her burden toward shore in the manner of a life guard beaching a dory.

At length, he lay half submerged in the shallow water. On hands and knees, Betty crawled out on the bank. Then she clutched Chick by the shoulders and laboriously dragged him clear of the stream. She had forgotten her own pain, her terrible fatigue; new courage came to her as she knelt beside him and began to raise and lower his arms—the only form of artificial respiration she knew.

It was awkward business, but Betty kept at it doggedly; and after a few minutes she was rewarded by seeing his eyelids flutter. A long, choking sigh—and he was blinking dazedly up at her.

"Where—where are we at?" he mumbled. "What's happened?"

"We're on the left bank of the river. The current washed us ashore. We can't be very far downstream, judging by the row back there. Don't try to move yet, Chick."

But Chick was beginning to come around. His head was clearing and despite the loss of blood and the gnawing pain in his shoulder, some of his strength was returning. He reached out and took her hand, pressing it in his own.

"If I'm restin' here instead of at the bottom of the river, I know who I can thank for it," he said. "I reckon it's a lucky thing for me that Chink's got only one eye!"

Upstream rifles cracked, six-guns roared; yells and shouts and curses added to the din. Presently Chick got shakily to his feet. He was still very wobbly and unsteady, but he thought he could make shift to walk. A fresh burst of sound from the direction of the dam brought an anxious pucker to his brow.

"Sounds like our fellers must be holed up at the top of the canyon," he said. "I—say, did yuh hear that? There's more than four rifles replyin' to Morton's crowd! What do yuh suppose that means?"

"Maybe instead of going back to the house, Patsy headed over this way and joined the boys."

"Not unless he flew," Chick objected. "He didn't have time to make it before the dam went up. No— By golly!" he broke off excitedly. "Yore dad's up there, an' mebbe Willy an' the Chink, too! An' if Morton gets up enough guts to rush the top of the slope, he'll wipe 'em all out! He's got five to one against 'em!"

"Oh, Chick! What can we do?"

"I don't know, honey, but I'm goin' to try somethin' anyway. Lead's flyin' pretty thick up where I'm goin' an' I ain't aimin' to have yuh stop none of it. Will yuh just sit tight here and wait until I come back for yuh?"

"But, Chick," she protested, "I want to help—"

"Honey girl, yuh've done enough helpin' to last for the rest of yore life. Just lie down an' make yoreself as comfortable as yuh can."

It was useless to argue, and reluctantly she yielded.

"Do be careful, Chick," she implored him. "Don't get yourself into a jam. Remember, your guns may be out of commission now."

"Yeah, I know that," nodded Chick. Ruefully, he removed his gunbelts; but before tossing them to the ground he drew one of the Colts from its holster and slipped it into his pocket. If it were worthless as a gun, it might serve as a club.

A kiss, a quick, tight embrace and he started off in the direction of the gunfire, keeping close to the river bank. He moved slowly and carefully. His head was still spinning and he felt rather weak and sick; but he wasn't afraid of passing out again. He was ashamed of having done it at all.

Rounding the bend, he could see, from the orange-red flashes, that his surmise had been correct. Seven rifles cracked at irregular intervals from the top of the canyon, while three times that number blazed in reply from points of vantage in the brush and scrub timber that covered the side of the gulch.

"They could mebbe stand 'em off all right if they was only able to see," Chick ruminated. "They'd have a good chance of winnin' out, if it only was light. But the way it is—" And then a brilliant, daring plan flashed into his mind.

"Holy hell!" he chortled. "Light? We'll *make* it light!"

The thin, pencil-like flashes of rifle-fire showed him that the Box H men were spread out in a sort of skirmish line for a distance of about a hundred yards, and were gradually working their way up the side of the ravine.

If they were able to reach a point from which they could pour a cross

fire into the little group of punchers who were so valiantly holding their position behind a clump of boulders in a depression at the rim of the canyon, they would be able to storm the crest with comparative safety to themselves. And once there, they would make short work of Old Man Parsons and the disorganized defense.

Realizing that every second counted heavily, Chick stumbled over the rough, uneven slope until he reached a point some twenty yards ahead of the left flank of the attacking party. The darkness was intense; no one dreamed he was anywhere near and he could walk unseen and unsuspected. He stooped over, scraped together a little pile of pine needles and twigs, and scattered dry leaves over and around it.

Cutting back a short distance, he gathered a similar little pile. Then he straightened out his line and made half a dozen more piles at about fifteen-yard intervals. Another heap of twigs and leaves beyond Morton's right flank and he had the Box H men surrounded on three sides. Pulling his water-proof match box from his pocket, he bent low, and striking a light, applied it to the pile nearest him.

Then, pausing only long enough to make sure that the leaves and twigs had ignited, he hurried from pile to pile, touching a match to each. Then he wormed his way rapidly through the undergrowth, circling back of the rim in an effort to reach the Lazy Y punchers.

It hadn't rained in the valley for a month, and the brush was dry as tinder. In almost less time than it takes to tell it, the little fires had run together, forming a low, bright semi-circle that crackled and snapped joyously as it ate its way over the ground. A slender red tongue of flame licked over the fallen limb of a dead jackpine, hissed, sputtered and flared high.

A dead shrub caught . . . another . . . and another, until all at once a spreading arc of flame was roaring up the side of the canyon. The conflagration resembled some mythical fiery monster, devouring everything that lay in its path.

Slick Henderson, who had cannily remained well in the rear, was the first among the Box H punchers to discover the new and terrible enemy. At first sight of the swiftly brightening glow, he thought that someone had accidentally dropped a match or cigarette; but in a moment he realized that the fire was advancing from three directions and closing in speedily.

## CHAPTER XVI

### *The Dawn of Peace*

IT was still fairly dark in the timber, but Henderson knew that as soon as the blaze passed over the ridge below him, the entire side of the canyon would be as bright as day.

He leaped to his feet and raced through the brush yelling for Morton, who had taken a sheltered position in the center of the line, in order to direct the movements of his men.

"Mike! There's a hell-roarin' fire comin' up the slope!" Slick bawled. "Duck, or we'll be knocked over like tomato cans on a fence!"

Mike whirled about and stared down the side of the canyon. Billows of smoke were rising through the tree tops and the red glow brightened to vermilion even as he turned.

"Reckon we'd better run for it, Slick," he said.

"We can't. The damn thing's comin' from three ways!"

"Then we'll fight it out! Down!" Morton roared, as a stream of lead sprayed from the top of the gorge. "Take cover!"

Shouting and cursing, the men dived for the nearest shelter, dodging behind stumps, boulders and fallen trees—any place to get out of the light thrown by the blazing brush behind them.

"By golly!" muttered Old Man Parsons with a sigh of relief, as the light flared up below him. "I reckon that blaze has just about saved our hides!" He leaned his smoking Winchester against a huge boulder which, with several smaller ones and a few rotting stumps, formed the scanty breastwork behind which the Lazy Y punchers were entrenched at the rim of the canyon.

"Reckon yo're right," Frisco Willy assented. "Everything's jake now!"

But the Old Man was not so sure. Ever since the dam had blown up, he had been anxious over Betty and Chick; and as the moments passed and he heard nothing from either of them, he had become acutely fearful for their safety.

"Wonder where them two kids are?" he said. "Willy, if anythin's happened to 'em, I'll never forgive myself. I've been thinkin' of 'em every minute—"

"Thinkin' about Betty's all right," said a muffled voice behind him; "but why worry about an ornery maverick like Chick Wilson?"

"What?" Frisco roared, rising to his full height to confront the speaker. "Why—" And then he saw Chick squatting beside him, grinning from ear to ear. "Aw, shucks! Yuh damn fool," said Willy, while the others guffawed at his discomfiture.

"Where's Betty?" Old Man Parsons demanded.

"She wanted to get into the thick of this, but I wouldn't let her," Chick explained. "I left her 'bout a quarter of a mile down the river. We can fetch her later."

"Fine, Chick; we'll start soon's—"

All at once, with a crash and a rumble, a rock came bounding down the slope; there was a loud snapping of twigs as some heavy body moved through the brush to the right. Old Man Parsons snapped a shot in the direction of the sound.

"For the love of Mike!" came a half-startled, half-angry voice. "Why don't you look where you're shooting?"

"Betty!" the Old Man shouted.

The next instant the girl came stumbling through a clump of cedars and up to the group. She went straight to Chick Wilson.

"Even a war can't stop 'em," Frisco chuckled. "Don't look, anybody!" Ostentatiously, he turned his back on the pair. "I reckon— Ouch! Yuh gol durned hook-wormed goat!" A bullet whizzing past had fanned his cheek and forced him to give his attention to the major business at hand. He poked his rifle between two boulders and sent half a dozen shots flaming in the general direction of the Box H cowhands.

"Give 'em lead an' plenty of it!" Chick sang out. "The fire's workin' in on 'em, an' pretty soon they'll have to come to us. Either they'll surrender, or we'll pick 'em off like they was ducks in a shootin' gallery."

The same idea was beginning to dawn on Mike Morton. He realized that it would be a matter of only a very few moments before the heat and flames would drive him and his men from shelter.

"Do yuh think the men will stand for a charge?" he demanded of Slick Henderson at his elbow.

"They'd charge into hell if yuh lead 'em," the foreman told him.

"All right then," Morton made up his mind. "Come on, boys!" he shouted. "We're goin' up after 'em!"

Several men sprang up with him and Mike started a frenzied dash up the slope. But he had taken hardly a dozen strides before a bullet went through his shoulder; another struck him in the abdomen. Down he went, rolling over and over on the rough, uneven ground, clutching at his wounds, screaming hideously. A final tortured shriek, a convulsive shudder that jerked his whole body and he lay still.

The Box H cowboys, bereft of their leader, fled down the slope and

crouched behind trees and boulders as close to the oncoming flames as they dared to get.

Chick ordered his men to cease firing.

"Yuh better chuck in yore cards, hombres!" he shouted. "The game's over. Come out peaceful-like, an' we'll let yuh get away from the fire."

There was a moment's conference among the Box H men, and then the remains of a shirt that had once been gray was waved in token of surrender.

"All right, Morton; yuh come up first," Chick called.

"Morton ain't never goin' nowheres no more," a wounded Box H puncher called back mournfully.

"Well, then, Henderson; if yo're still able to walk, lead the procession."

Aside from a creased left arm, the crafty Henderson was unharmed.

"How do I know yuh ain't goin' to shoot me?" he demanded.

"'Cause we ain't Box H men," Chick replied. "But yuh can stay where yuh are if yuh want to. It don't make no difference to me."

The flames, sweeping over a little ridge just a few yards behind the Box H punchers, made Henderson's decision for him.

"I'm a-comin'!" he shouted. "I'm a-comin' right along."

"Well, come on, but leave yore guns behind yuh. One funny move an' yuh'll be teamed up with yore old pardner again."

Henderson, hands above his head, came up the slope.

"Tie him up," Chick directed, and Old Man Parsons himself sprang to do the job. "Now the rest of yuh," Chick addressed the other Box H men, "come on up, one at a time, an' remember that what I told Henderson goes double for yuh buzzards."

The men were only too glad to obey. They stumbled out from cover and presently were lined up near the canyon rim.

"Now listen to what I have to say to yuh," began Chick. "We're takin' Henderson along with us as a sort o' hostage. Yuh hombres had better look after yore dead an' wounded, an' then cut some pine brush, build a back-fire up here along the ridge an' get that blaze under control.

"An' now that Morton has departed for a warmer climate, an' Slick ain't goin' to be around here no more—he's leavin' for Montana in the mornin' —I'm hopin' mebbe the rest of yuh will quit huntin' trouble an' behave."

None of the Box H men dissented. They were war-worn and weary, and the idea of peace wasn't distasteful to them. Only Henderson protested.

"Listen, Mister," Chick cut him short coldly, "yuh heard what I said —an' it goes. Yuh go! Elsewise, yuh an' me'll match shots soon's it's daylight. Take yore choice."

Slick shot a nervous look at him.

"Reckon I'll be takin' a squint at Montana," he growled.

"That's plumb good judgment," Willy observed dryly, and even the Box H punchers laughed. Everyone knew that Henderson wouldn't draw guns with Chick Wilson for the whole State of Texas.

Betty and Chick dropped behind the rest, and by the time they reached the notch, Old Man Parsons and the boys had swung into their saddles and were riding down the trail. Willy started a cowboy song, and one by one the others joined in. It was a cheerful, good-natured, noisy crowd. Their voices, blending harmoniously in the chorus, drifted back through the cool, sweet air.

On the notch, however, there was not a sound. But neither words nor music could have increased the happiness of the two who stood there—the comely fair-haired girl and the handsome, if somewhat battle-scarred cowboy. Arm in arm, with supreme contentment, they watched the first pale streaks of light brighten into the clear, peaceful dawn of a beautiful summer morning.

# The Sport of Kings

By Allan K. Echols

**In days of old many a valiant knight engaged in thrilling jousts to win the heart of some fair maiden. But the sport of kings is the sport of cowboys, too, and one lively tilt on a pair of husky broncs gave a certain waddy a chance for first place with a sweet daughter of the prairies.**

I THINK it was one of those writing people who once said, "For ways that are dark and tricks that are vain the heathen Chinee is peculiar." Which shows that he knew more about laundrymen than he did about people who have anything to do with horse races. Because he would have made the last part of it read, "The heathen Chinee is a younger brother to the babes who were lost in the woods." It might not have made a rhyme, but it would have been more truth than poetry.

What with me being an old horseman, so to speak, I've seen plenty of amateur horse races in the cow country, and I know my oat-burners. We don't have any silk riding togs and "colors" and all that sort of stuff, but we have plenty of "off-colors."

And we have plenty of the spirit that makes the old game the sport of kings. If you don't believe it, you just hang around our little Rodondo Annual Round-Up and Rodeo some year and watch things come to a boil.

For real drama, let me offer you the "working cow-horse race" that was run this year. Did I say, "The heathen Chinee is peculiar?" Listen.

We've got a new fair-grounds about a couple of miles out of the little town of Rodondo, and after the fall

round-up we hold a rodeo there. People pour in from all the surrounding counties and it's a regular bang-up event.

This year there was the biggest crowd we ever had. Outfits had come from miles around and had thrown their bedwagons and gear all around the fair-grounds. Mobs of folks were milling around, swapping prize stock and going hog-wild over the rodeo events that were setting new records for calf-roping and bulldogging and everything. Even those professional performers who don't do much except follow the big shows and work for prize money were beginning to take notice of our event. The prizes were beginning to get into the real money class.

Every one of the big rodeos kind of takes on a specialty of its own which it features above the others. We ourselves were getting pretty well known for the horse races that closed our show.

This being the day before the races, the ranchers had their horses in the stalls where they were taking care of them pretty careful to see that nothing happened to them at the last minute. The crowds were swarming around, looking at the running stock and rushing the book-makers with their bets.

I happened to mosey over toward the stall where Todd Steele had his horse holed up.

"Hello, Doc," Todd sings out to me in that carefree voice of his. "Come over and take a look at old man 'Money-Maker' himself."

Todd was currying down a lean bay that had all the beautiful lines of a real thoroughbred. The animal was built for speed and reminded me of a greyhound as he stood there with his muzzle in Todd's hand.

"Tony's gonna two-step in ahead of the whole field tomorrow," Todd said, and there was more than a touch of pride in his voice.

But I thought I noticed something else in his voice, too. It might have been apprehension or worry, I don't know. I'm sure if he had any worries he wouldn't have exposed them if he could help it.

I watched Todd's only puncher, Swede Larsen, putting fresh hay in the stall. "You oughtn't to have any trouble corralling the stakes tomorrow," I admitted. "And the money's not something to throw away; a thousand dollars is at least a grand in anybody's language."

Todd's eyes lit in that infectious grin of his. "Yep, and it's more than just the money to me this time; it just about tells the tale of whether I sink or swim."

That statement gave me an idea of what was worrying him. Some two years ago Steele had taken up some land about twenty miles east of town, which he had stocked with his savings, and he hadn't yet got a herd big enough to start selling off. I was pretty sure he was doing business on a shoestring, but I admired his grit to try to get into business for himself. It would be great if he pulled through, but if he didn't it meant the loss of all but his time and money. He sure deserved to win.

"Todd," I told him encouragingly, "if your surviving depends on this race you've got a dog-eared cinch. There are only five horses entered in that 'working' race, and everybody knows your Tony's the fastest one of the bunch. That's what scared out the rest of the entries."

Todd rubbed his chin. "I don't know," he said. "Cliff Pennington and Tate Brady have got a couple of pretty fast steppers. Still, I think I could beat them if nothing happened."

I looked at him kinda funny, wondering what he meant by that remark. But I didn't get a chance to ask him outright because suddenly the thoughtful frown on his face gave place to a broad grin and he jerked his hat off. I looked around and then understood.

Sylvia Donnel and her father had come up to look at the horses, and I knew Steele had forgot I existed. I reckon any young man would forget things when he looked at that gal.

After grunting a hello at Steele, old Bob came over to me and started a conversation. But I couldn't get interested in it much, on account of I was watching the young pair.

If I said Sylvia was pretty I didn't quite put over the idea. She had a way of being what you might call elf-like and at the same time not at all helpless. That is, she had a fluffy softness and then again she had some kind of an air of self-reliance and independence that made you puzzle yourself to figure her out. She's the type that if I was about thirty years younger I'd shore appreciate having by my side if I was, say—just starting into the ranching business.

She inherited her love of horses and her sense of sportsmanship from her father, old Star-Circle Bob Donnel. And perhaps her mother's beauty; I'd heard about how pretty she was before she'd died a long time ago.

But what interested me now was speculating on what she thought of Todd Steele. I reckon almost everybody else in the county was interested in the same question, because there were a couple of complications. The complications were, namely — Cliff Pennington and Tate Brady, the same two ranchers that had the horses Todd was not sure of beating, if something happened.

Even though Todd's horse had the edge on those two entries, Pennington and Brady had somewhat the edge on him in the race for Sylvia; that is, in a way of speaking. Both of them were well established on their ranches and were doing all right, while Todd, having just started, didn't hardly have a pot to cook in. Every dime he had was going into his ranch.

Anyway, Todd was showing Sylvia how shiny he had got his horse and telling her happily just how badly he wanted to win that race. I couldn't catch all he was saying, but I got something about his wanting to ask her a question the minute he crossed the finish line first—provided he crossed first.

I heard her ask him why he didn't ask her now, and that kinda made me feel better. But I decided that he was a fool when he explained that if he didn't win it, he'd have to hold off asking the question for a long time.

As if a thoroughbred like Sylvia was going to depend on whether a man she loved had a thousand dollars in his pocket or not! I could have wrung his neck, but you know how fellows are like that. You couldn't blame him for wanting to feel that he could make her comfortable if she decided to—anyway, whatever that question was.

It worried me a little, too, because I knew the situation. Not having been in love in all my fifty years of prodding horses around, unless you count that time I quit chewing tobacco because that sheepherder's widow said—But that's another story.

Anyway, I knew where the danger lay. I knew that a woman wants a man to go out and take what he wants instead of being so self-abasing about things. Now, if I'd upped and stood on my rights about that chewing tobacco . . .

But, as I was saying, the danger lay in the fact that neither Cliff Pennington nor Tate Brady was holding back in their efforts in Sylvia's direction. Brady and Pendleton would have shot each other's eyes out over Sylvia; they didn't make any secret of the fact that each thought the other was just about two feet lower than a rattlesnake's chassis. Of course, neither one of them thought seriously about Todd Steele; that is, up until just now, which was pretty late in the game.

Todd was talking and Sylvia was listening in that fashion which leads men to say things they sometimes

wish they hadn't, when out of the crowd that was milling around, who should come over but Cliff Pennington. You'd just know he'd locate her as sure as a wild bee can locate a honey tree.

"Howdy," he says, taking off his big white hat and kinda edging himself between her and Steele as though Todd didn't even exist. "I've been looking for you everywhere. . . . Oh, hello, Mr. Donnel. While you're not doing anything, I'd like awfully well for you and Sylvia to come over and see my horse."

He was doing the rush act right, gushing all over the place till the sickly smile was running all over his new yellow silk shirt and his white chaps. It made me sick, and when I saw old Bob take Sylvia and the three of them walk away, leaving Todd staring after them, it made me sore all over.

But Todd was that way. I never heard him say a cross word since I knew him. I knew he hadn't missed the sarcasm in Pennington's voice, but he held his temper like a gentleman.

Still, events was beginning to transpire, as the writing fellow said. I saw Tate Brady in the crowd just as he set eyes on Pennington leading Sylvia and her dad over toward his stall. It wasn't at all like the fast-moving Mr. Brady to let his rival get away with a thing like that, so he proceeded immediately to spoil Mr. Pennington's party by the simple device of joining it.

The four of them disappeared into the crowd and I guess it's a pretty good thing that neither of them boys had poison sacs in their throats like rattlesnakes, or there'd have been a couple of funerals in the making quicker than hell could burn a feather.

I saw Todd Steele glance quizzically at the party and then apparently give his whole attention to his horse. He had a reputation for being an easy-going hombre who took things as they came, and I have an idea most people would have figured he was just turning over the field to those two rivals. Which would show they hadn't considered what kind of a man it took to start a ranch of his own on a couple of dollars and a couple of cows, if you know what I mean. I knew there was something on his mind besides a horse race right then.

He takes me by his arm. "Come on over under the grandstand, Doc," he says. "You need a dash of soda."

We found old Bill Grundy under the grandstand. Bill was acting as book-maker for the race and several fellows were putting up their bets for the next day's races. Between that and dishing out drinks of soda at fifty cents a throw from a bottle in his pistol pocket, old Grundy was pretty busy.

"You better raise the odds on my nag," Todd told him, as the bald-headed old man filled our glasses and slipped the bottle back into his pocket. "I'm winning that race tomorrow as sure as you're a foot high."

Old Grundy was one of those race-track followers that everybody likes but nobody would trust any further than you could throw a bull by the tail—unless you made a bet with him. He'd steal your underwear without taking off your clothes, but if you placed a bet with him he'd pay you if he had to commit murder to get the money. Those old-timers are dying out fast, what with politics and prohibition showing them cards and spades.

Old Grundy filled our glasses again and looked at Todd shrewdly. "I got your nag up at six-to-four to win. Why don't you load up on him and make a killing?"

Todd made some kind of evasive reply, but I knew he just didn't have the money to bet.

Grundy wiped the pine-board counter of his little concession stand. "Pennington and Brady are telling it around that you don't expect to win.

Saying that's why you don't lay some money on your horse's nose."

I was watching Todd and I saw the effect of Grundy's statement. I had a good idea Pennington and Brady hadn't said anything at all, and so had Todd, I'm sure; but anyway, I could see it got under his skin. Too much is enough of anything, and Todd was getting too much.

Todd spun his glass like a top on the counter and looked at old Grundy.

"If you've got any friends you like real well," he said evenly, "don't let them lay any money on those other two horses, because it'll go like ragweed in a prairie fire."

"Says who?" Grundy chirped.

"Says me!" Todd tapped the counter with the back of his hand. "And if you want a good cut-in, go see those two sheepherders and get them to dig up a lot of dinero. I'm waiting till morning to lay my bet, to get better odds, but you better be here with the dough to cover it."

He clanked a dollar on the counter and strode out, followed by me. I stumbled over a stick from wondering where Todd was going to get money to back up his big words.

"You ain't gonna risk your spread—"

Todd interrupted me. "Listen, Doc, I've put up with that pair of sidewinders as long as I'm going to. Old man Josephs down at the bank would let me have as much as five hundred dollars any time—he said he would. I'm going to shoot the whole works, once for all."

I tried to argue with him. "The trouble is that it's a bad bet. You put up your five hundred, and, being the favorite, you have to put up five hundred and if you win you'll only win less than four hundred—even if you win. Anything might happen—"

"I'll win or be sunk," he said. "Of course, Josephs don't know what I'll be doing with the money or he'd never let me have it. But watch me tomorrow."

Before I could put in another word he was gone. I saw him go out to where his second string horse was tied up to his wagon wheel, throw his saddle on him and trot off toward town to see the banker.

This nag he was riding was his only horse other than Tony, and he was just about as sorry a specimen as I ever laid eyes on. He had been worn out a long time ago. Todd just kept him around because he was sorry for him and to ride when he was giving Tony a rest; he was using him now to save Tony for the race.

NOW I'm one of those people who don't believe anything they hear and just about half what they see. But at the same time I've got to admit that there are things I don't understand, although I experience them.

For instance, I almost always know when something is going to happen. It might be a case like the old woman who always "felt it in her bones." But anyway, when I finally got out to the fair-grounds the next morning I knew something was wrong before I set foot inside the gate.

It wasn't anything I could see, you understand—I just knew it somehow. The crowd was packed around and there wasn't anything changed so far as I could see, but I found myself worried and making my way through the crowd in a hurry as though I was due somewhere on urgent business. You must have experienced the same thing at some time. It gives you a kind of creepy feeling that worries you all the more.

The crowd was dusty and dirty and having a good time; but there I was pushing my way through it, grunting whenever anybody spoke to me, and not paying any attention to anybody. I was looking for somebody or something and I couldn't have told you what it was or who it was for the life of me. But that only worried me the more.

The crowd was a sight. Dust, dirt,

stock bawling, and out in the centerfield of the race track they were running off the finals of the calf-roping contest and the steer-riding events. It was a mob that ordinarily would have put joy into my soul, but now, for some strange reason it was having the opposite effect.

The day was beautiful, too. It wasn't too hot, and the crowd was in a good humor. I ran into Sylvia and her dad down by the stables.

There was a lot of excitement around them and I knew right then that my hunch hadn't been wrong. There was something happening, sure enough.

Then I saw Todd Steele. He come rushing up to me, and talk about a man snorting smoke through his nostrils! I never knew one human being could pack so much dynamite without blowing himself clear up.

"I want to talk to you, Doc," he says, low and ominous-like.

He hardly saw Sylvia as he dragged me out of the crowd.

"I'm ruined," he blurted out when we were out of earshot of the crowd.

"What's the matter?" I asked, and there was a lump came up somewhere in my breathing apparatus. I had a hunch that catastrophe was sitting on his shoulder.

"Everything," he says. "And I think I know what it's all about."

"Tell me."

"Tony's gone!"

"Stole?"

"I don't think so. Somebody let him out of his stall last night. I think he made a bee line for the home ranch. But I've got a good idea who did it."

"Where was the Swede?" I asked. Todd had made Swede sleep in the stall with the horse the night before.

"I had Swede stay in town last night," he admitted. "You see, I got to old man Josephs after the bank was closed. He said he would let me have the money this morning. So I had Swede stay in town to get it this morning because I'd be busy."

I grunted. "Well, we've got to find Tony. It's twelve-thirty now and the race starts at one."

"It ain't any use," Todd answered. "Old Bascomb drove in from out my way in his buckboard. He says he saw Tony hot-footing it toward my place early this morning. He'd be there now and we couldn't make the twenty miles and back in time for the race. Besides, if we did, Tony would be so tired he wouldn't have a chance."

I felt sick all over. This meant the end of Todd. He needed that thousand dollars in the worst way, and I didn't like to see two such devils as Pennington and Brady getting away without any competition—either in the race or for Sylvia. And I knew this would hit Todd Steele such a blow that it would take a long time for him to recover. Maybe he'd be too late; women sometimes get impatient.

I tried to smile. There wasn't much encouragement I could give him. "Anyway," I managed to remark lamely, "you won't be risking any of old Josephs' money gambling."

"Won't I?" Steele answered, and kicked up a lot of dust with the toe of his boot. "You haven't heard the half of it yet."

I looked at him queerly.

"I told Swede last night that I'd be busy this morning, so he was to bring the money and place it with old Grundy on my horse. I was out looking for Tony when that squarehead comes out and he goes up to Grundy and makes the bet. Grundy took it, not telling him that Tony was missing."

All I could do was whistle.

"Of course, in the meantime, everybody else around here knew that Tony was gone, so naturally the odds that I would win the race dropped to almost nothing. Grundy gives Swede twenty-to-one that I won't win and Swede, not knowing Tony was gone, takes it and is dumb enough to think he got a great bargain. But without Tony it would be safe for Grundy to

have offered a hundred-to-one that I would lose. I can't possibly win."

"At those odds against you, you'd make a lot of money if you did win," I said by way of feeble encouragement.

"I'll sell you my chances for a ten-dollar bill," he answered, but I didn't take the offer.

"Let's take a look at Tony's stall," I suggested, to try to take his mind off his trouble.

At the stall I kicked around through the hay. Then I heard a kind of jingle and stooped over and picked up a spur that was half hidden under the hay on the floor. At about the same moment Todd did the same thing! Two spurs in Tony's stall.

We looked at them and then at each other. They weren't mates, but both of us recognized them. Todd turned them over in his hand, and if I ever saw murder in a man's eyes it was sure blazing from those gray balls of steel in Todd's head.

"You know," he said, kind of low and thoughtful-like, "Pennington and Tate didn't each lose one of his spurs in Tony's stall. That would be too crazy. I bet you a fortune them sheepherders stole a spur from each other when they separately thought of turning Tony out. They knew he would run away and head for the ranch. And each one of them figured he'd incriminate the other one. It's too plain."

I thought he was right. In fact, it looked to me as though that was about the only thing that could have happened.

Those two rascals had got worried about Todd Steele winning the race, and each one of them had got the idea of getting him out of it and at the same time make it look like the other had done the dirty work. That would help each one get an edge on the other as far as Sylvia was concerned, by proving to her that the other was a crook.

But they'd sure messed up things for everybody.

Todd was facing complete ruin. I couldn't help admiring how he got his dander up. I've got an idea that it wouldn't have taken much to make him go a-shooting, but those hombres weren't worth a decent man like Todd getting in trouble about.

Todd grabs me by the arm suddenly. "Come with me," he says, snappy, pulling me through the crowd to old Grundy's soda shack under the grandstand.

He walks inside it, gets his hand into old Grundy's collar and rattles the two odd spurs in his face. Old Grundy turns as white as a dirty sheet and just looks back with his eyes popping out.

"Spill it," Todd snaps.

Grundy tried to gurgle out something about not knowing what Todd was talking about.

"Listen, you dirty tout," Todd grits, "I don't have to do any explaining. But somebody's going to pay. You stand to win when I lose. If I don't find out just who's back of this, I'm holding you responsible. I haven't skinned a sneaking coyote alive for a long time, but I still know how!" He rolled the rowels of the spurs across old Grundy's gray face. "You gonna talk—or be skinned?"

"I'll tell you," Grundy said, shivering. It was plain that he was afraid he didn't have long to live if he didn't clear his own skirts.

"It was Pennington and Brady. Each one of them comes to me at different times yesterday and brings a spur; each of them gives me a twenty-dollar bat-hide to drop the spur in Tony's stall and let the horse out. They was double-crossing each other and naturally I couldn't tell either one of them about having the other job. So I just does it for both of them at once.

"But honest, Todd, I didn't mean it against you. I was just thinking how much ironic justice there would be when both spurs was found. I wasn't thinking about how much I would

win when Tony was not in the race. Honest, I thought Tony would hang around and you'd find him this morning. Honest—"

Todd had thrown Grundy down in his chair in the soda stand and was headed back toward the stables, with me following at his heels. It's funny about crooks like Grundy—they're something like children. They'll slick you out of your socks and then when they're caught you haven't the heart to knock their teeth down their throat. It would be too much like kicking a child.

"What you going to do?" I asked Todd, as we reached the stable.

"Do?" He looked at me strangely. "What else is there to do? I'm going to get on that other horse of mine and ride him in that race. I don't expect to win, but when we finish the two laps I'm going to keep riding, and I'm going to chase those two hombres out of this town with a six-shooter—right in front of the grandstand. They want some excitement; we'll give them their money's worth!"

"You gonna ride that sway-backed plow-horse in that race?" I asked.

"Sure. I put up my entrance fee, didn't I? You don't think I'm not going to get a run for my money, do you?"

What can you say to a man like that?

There was plenty of excitement around the stables now. They were blowing a cow-horn to announce the race and people were rushing for places in the centerfield and grandstand.

And the word had somehow got around that there was going to be more to this than just a horse race. Everybody had his suspicions that there was dirt behind Todd's horse being missing, and there was an undercurrent of expectancy. What was he going to do about it?

We came up to Sylvia and her dad. Old man Donnel just went up and shook hands with Todd and walked away without saying a word. But that gesture meant something. I can't explain it, but you know how old-timers are.

Then the air got to be electric. Pennington and Brady were all set and were having a last word with Sylvia. People saw Todd coming up to the little group and instinctively made way. Todd had his gun on just as the other two did, and there was a space opened up around them.

The look on Todd's face was inscrutable, a kind of half smile that was more than skin-deep, but I would have hated to go up against such a look if I wasn't sure of myself.

Then he said something that I couldn't quite figure out at the moment.

"Thanks for the tip about the spur. I'll take it up after the race."

He was looking at the two men and could have been speaking to either one of them. Then he turned and got his old worn-out cow-pony saddled and headed for the race track.

I saw Pennington and Brady look at each other suspiciously and if there ever was a gleam of hatred connecting two people, that gleam sure was being exchanged by those two hombres. Each turned without a word and made off towards his horse.

Well, sir, the race was getting started, and the crowd was getting wild. Everybody by now had heard about the trouble and they all had their opinions of what it was all about. They knew of the rivalry between the three men, and it looked now like one of them was eliminated. What they wanted to know was what he was going to do about it.

You could hear talk around, a word here and a word there. But you knew what this race meant to the whole country. It was a kind of a tournament like the knights used to have in the story books; at least, the crowd seemed to feel that way about it. They kinda had the idea that this was to be a kind of three-handed race

with a girl as the prize, or rather a two-handed race, since Todd's horse was gone. Nobody figured the other two horses counted much. You know how people get.

I sat next to Sylvia and her dad in the grandstand, and the look in her face was kinda pitiful to see. There was a blaze of fiery pride in her eyes, and little spots of pink on her cheeks which told me she was burning up about something. It must have been pretty humiliating to her to know that people were looking at her and talking about her as though she was some kind of a prize package to be won on a horse race. I had an idea she was due to explode. You know, thoroughbreds are not as placid as work stock.

And I had a pretty good idea what it would take to set off the explosion. That little Sylvia girl wasn't anybody's fool, and she didn't have to be told the sordid details to know that that Pennington hombre and Tate Brady had a hand in the doings. I'd hate to be in their shoes if she ever started telling them which stall to head into.

But there was still another catch in it. She hadn't said anything to Todd Steele one way or another. I wondered if she felt that he had a hand in her embarrassment. At first that looked a little funny to me, but then I got another idea.

Sylvia was testing him—wanted to stand by and see what he was going to do about it. She was wondering whether he was going to take it lying down or just what. That would give her a pretty fair idea of whether he could stand up under a load.

Now the crowd was shouting and yelling. They still figured they had a four-horse race, with the other two not meaning so much, Pennington's horse and Brady's being conceded the fastest two left. And with them two hombres' rivalry over Sylvia! Did that crowd roar?

There suddenly came an even louder shout, and this time there was a lot of laughter mixed with it, boos and catcalls. I looked down toward the gate to the track to see what it was.

The other four riders were in. The crowd was laughing at the fifth.

There was Todd Steele riding in on that sway-backed nag of his, looking not to the right nor the left. You'd think he was riding Man-O'-War or another of them world-beaters, instead of that flea-bitten buckskin whose back hung down in the middle like a suspension bridge. Showing up beside these sleek animals the other four men were on, Todd's old horse looked like nothing but a scarecrow.

About all you could say for the animal was that he had a leg on each corner of his body, but it looked doubtful if they would stay attached if the animal broke into a run. I was afraid Todd wouldn't be able to keep the nag awake until the starter's gun sounded. The animal's head was hanging low like he was tired of what this dreary world had to offer.

He looked up at the crowd out of the corner of his sad eyes and went back into his meditation. Todd tried to jerk his head up and get him into line, but the nag was simply too world-weary to take any interest.

The crowd yelled its heads off, as though some super-clown were entering the race on a broomstick. But Todd Steele didn't seem to hear them.

I tell you it was the saddest sight I ever saw in my life, and one of the bravest things. I wouldn't have come out there—already beaten by two rivals—riding an old nag, and have stood for all that jeering for the best ranch in the world. I'd rather the crowd had pelted me with rotten eggs.

A crowd is cruel and the way that mob razzed Todd Steele would have torn the heart out of any man living. There wasn't a chance in a thousand of that old broken-down crowbait outrunning either one of those four other horses, and nobody knew it better than Todd Steele. Yet, he had come out to

fight after he was doomed to lose, doomed before the race started.

Cliff Pennington, looking like a Western fashion plate in his yellow silk shirt and white chaps and hat, sat on his prancing horse that was slicked down until you could see your face on the surface of him. Pennington looked at Steele and sneered. Tate Brady laughed out loud. I could have put a bullet through their dirty carcasses without a struggle.

But Pennington and Brady didn't look at each other!

Now the five of them were around the starting line, jockeying for position. Pennington and Brady were trying to outwit each other without looking each other in the face. Todd Steele paid no attention to either one of them, but took the worst position on the outside without trying for a better one.

I stole a glance at Sylvia sitting along beside me. Her face was a puzzle. She sat on the front edge of her chair and her hands were gripping the rail in front of her. Her eyes were glued on the riders and her lips were compressed; her body was tense as a watch spring.

The crowd in the grandstand was roaring, shooting wisecracks at Todd Steele, booing him and shouting their ridicule. And their thrusts didn't stop at remarks about his horse. Some of the things they said I know Sylvia heard, and they made me want to empty my gun into their vicious faces, but I held back.

What could have been going through Sylvia's mind right now? What could be that emotion that held her still as a statue and taut as a fiddle-string? Did she love Todd Steele enough to stand up for him against the jeering world, or did she think he was making a fool and a joke out of her in front of these people? I gripped my own chair in anxiety.

The starter's gun sounded. They were off!

A little puff of white smoke—the gun couldn't be heard over the roar of the jeering crowd.

This isn't a fairy story. Todd Steele's horse didn't make a sudden spurt and run ahead of all those genuinely fast horses. All four of them left him like he was standing still, giving him not a second thought. They were off in a cloud of dust that completely hid Steele and his slow mount.

It was a mile race on a half-mile track; two laps to go.

Todd had a quirt on his wrist and he laid it onto that worn-out cowpony. The animal did the best he could. He broke into a slow run far behind the others, but speed wasn't in him; he simply could not keep up with them.

They were on the other side of the track now, Steele a dozen or so laps behind the last of the four horses. There wasn't a chance for him to outrun them.

Then I took time off from hoping for miracles and got another look at Sylvia. She wasn't watching the race at all. Instead, she had her head buried in her handkerchief and she was crying bitter tears. God, what I wouldn't have given to have spared her this!

Now the four horses were rounding the end and coming down the stretch for the first lap. Pennington and Brady were neck-and-neck, with Pennington in the best position against the fence.

They passed the judges' stand, with the other two horses about neck-and-neck three lengths behind them. Then they started taking the turn and they were all whipping their mounts with vicious slashes. It was the last lap now, only half a mile to go. Todd Steele was more than a dozen lengths behind and his quirt was slashing the old nag to a burst of speed he didn't know he had. But it was not enough to do any good—the horse simply couldn't go any faster.

Through my glasses I saw Brady

try to jockey Pennington out of the inside position as they started to take the far turn. He cut his horse in behind Pennington's and then spurred him up, trying to pry the other horse away from the fence. It looked like he was getting away with it.

I could see Pennington's angry face twist into a snarl, and I knew he was shouting something at Brady while he tried to wave him back. It was like two dogs fighting over a bone.

But Brady was not being waved back at a time like this. His quirt snapped again and his horse pushed ahead a few more inches. He was making up what he had lost to get the coveted inside position.

Then I held my breath.

I saw Pennington's quirt flash and come down across the rump of Brady's horse. And in almost the same second Brady lashed out with his whip and it slashed across Pennington's face!

The crowd got to its feet with a roar.

Now Pennington and Brady were neck-and-neck, their horses running full tilt, and the two men were fighting each other with quirts!

Then it was fists! Around the last turn they came, and now each man was intent on only one thing, to knock the other off his horse.

A sudden silence fell over the crowd in the grandstand. The mob stood speechless before the most amazing thing they had ever seen on a race track. The two men looked like two prizefighters having it out on top of runaway horses, that were clinging to each other as though they were hitched together.

Almost instantly the whole lower end of the track was in a turmoil. What with flying quirts and flying fists, Brady got hold of Pennington's bridle reins and jerked them up just as Pennington let his whip fly across the face of Brady's horse.

Both animals stopped short and reared upward as though they had run squarely into a stone wall—fell over backward into a squirming tangle of threshing legs and hoofs. The horses screamed in terror, while in the middle of the mass was Pennington, and somewhere Brady.

But now the other two horses came on and their riders couldn't stop them or turn them in time. They reared up, tripped and plunged headlong into the mad pile of men and horses. The wild screams of the animals and shouts of the wounded men came pouring out of the pile that was now almost invisible, on account of the great cloud of dust that arose like the smoke of a forest fire.

Men started running, piling over the grandstand rail and fence and out onto the track. Women screamed and fainted. Men rushed to disentangle the mass, trying to get the horses onto their feet and save the men from death—if they were still alive.

They dragged Pennington and Brady out, the one limping, the other with an arm hanging useless at his side. I just reached the crowd in time to hear Pennington say:

"You will accuse me of putting that spur—"

But I didn't stop to listen, because I saw something nobody had noticed.

Sylvia Donnel had jumped over the grandstand rail and was running down the track. Todd Steele's horse was just approaching and he was starting to dismount. Sylvia grabbed his stirrup leather.

"Don't get off," she shouted at him. "Go on, Todd. Cross the finish line! They don't deserve your help. Don't stop!"

Todd's horse had been so far behind that he had been clear of the whole accident. He looked at the two enemies a moment, then his face broke into a grin.

It wasn't a hundred yards to the finish line, and he spurred his weary animal on. The worn-out cow-pony got clear across the line before he collapsed.

But Todd Steele's horse was the only one that crossed the finish line in that race!

I GUESS it was an hour afterward when we got everything straightened out and I ran into Todd and Sylvia. I found them in a kind of secluded nook back of the grandstand.

I went up to congratulate him on winning.

"It was a kind of a disappointment at that," he said. "I wanted to chase those hombres clear out of the Rodondo fair-grounds, but my horse couldn't stand the gaff. Now if I'd had Tony—"

"You might not have won at all," Sylvia finished for him. "And I'm not going to have you chasing men with guns. I don't like fighting men."

But she had her hands on his shoulders when she said it, and Todd had one of his arms around her waist. I knew she'd already come to a decision about men who will fight back.

Todd said to me, "You take this ticket to old Grundy and make him pay me—and twenty-to-one, at that. He'll think a long time before he unloads a pocketful of spurs in my stable."

"How much would that be?" I asked him.

"You go somewhere and figure it up for me," Todd grinned. "I've got some other figuring to do right now."

And never having been in love myself, unless you count the time that sheepherder's widow. . . .

But what's the use of going into that?

# Members of Trail's End

Whose pictures appear on page 631

FIRST ROW—*left to right*—Loretta Grove, St. Joseph, Mo.; Frank R. Seliga, Baltimore, Md.; Sadie Meadows, So. Charleston, W. Va.

SECOND ROW—*left to right*—Richard Swan Langdon, Kans.; Arthur Peterson, Jr., Chicago, Ill.; John F. McVay, Canton, Ill.

THIRD ROW—*left to right*—Yvette Paradis, Lewiston, Me.; Waldo Shinn, Concord, N. C.; Leonie Albert, Blind River, Ontario, Canada.

# Kiss of Death

By John Johnson

**She gave him a kiss which was to be the signal for his doom, thinking him guilty of range-land crime. But all unknowingly she had really made life so precious to him that plots and gunfire seemed powerless against his will to live and win her heart.**

THE rider dismounted at the door of the V-99 hacienda and swept off his sombrero with a bow. Juanita Vargas stepped back with a frown of distaste. "You again, Diego," she said.

"Are you glad to see me, *bonita?*" asked Diego Herrera, smiling. "I've come again to ask you to marry me."

He was dark and sleekly handsome, dressed in the tight-fitting silver-spangled garments of the Mexican dandy. Diego Herrera was a wealthy rancher and political boss, the most powerful and feared figure in this part of Sonora.

Juanita knew him of old—she saw through his smooth, pleasant surface to an inner spirit that was carelessly brutal, unscrupulous, evil. She said coldly, "I hate you, Diego—you know that."

"I have done you the honor of asking you, but I am not a patient man,

Juanita. *Por Dios,* some day I shall stop asking, and take!" Diego laughed. "At least, no one else shall ever have you. I can see to that, *querida!"*

"Why don't you let me alone?" Juanita cried. "You've no right to persecute me, to set spies on me that watch every move I make, to plot against every man who so much as looks at me! You've no right! And what does your mad jealousy bring you? I'd sooner die than ever belong to you!"

Diego laughed and turned to his horse. The animal quivered with fear at the approach of its master.

"Thoroughly broken, you see," remarked Diego as he mounted. "Yet he was a wild devil when my vaqueros caught him. I like spirit, defiance—it adds spice, it makes the final conquest all the sweeter. *Adios,* Juanita." He gestured to his bodyguard of half a dozen gunmen who waited nearby, and the troop rode away.

Manuel, Juanita's trusted old foreman, approached, glaring after the riders with helpless hate. He reported that he had just seen the leader of the rustlers who preyed on the V-99 cattle. "He is in Lucero today, señorita. An *Americano* cowboy, six feet tall and red-haired, with blue eyes of fire"

Juanita listened thoughtfully. "You are sure this rustler is connected with Diego?"

"But yes, señorita."

Juanita came to a sudden decision. "I'm going in to the town house for a few days, Manuel. Perhaps I can use Diego's murderous jealousy to our advantage. I'm riding to Lucero at once," she said.

STEVE ROLPH strolled down the main street of Lucero, his tall, powerful frame moving leisurely. His sombrero was pulled down over his reddish brown hair against the Sonora sun, his level blue eyes were bright with interest at the spectacle of the picturesque little Mexican town.

He saw Juanita Vargas coming from far away. Her grace and her erect, well rounded figure impressed even at a distance. Next he noticed her hair, a raven black that would seem blue-black in shadow. Nearer she came—now she was close at hand, and Steve could see her face.

She was of that pure Spanish type of beauty that is so vivid and startling as to appear almost unreal. The brilliant ovals of her dark eyes, the bow of her full, bright red lips, stood out in contrast against the fine ivory oval of her face. At the first glimpse of her, men were often moved to wonder and longing, and this red-haired Texan cowboy was no exception. His pace slowed, he stared.

She gave him a lingering glance of her great black eyes, then looked away. As she passed, her handkerchief fluttered to the ground, and Steve picked it up.

Five minutes later he was pacing along at her side, saying urgently, "But señorita, we cannot part like this—I mean, just meet and then never see—that is—" his usually fluent Spanish almost failed him.

"But what more is there, *Señor Americano?"* asked Juanita in excellent English. "You return my handkerchief—I thank you—and that is all. In my family we do not make acquaintances on the street."

They had come to a spacious adobe house on a side street. Juanita stopped at the door. "This is where I live, señor. *Adios,"* she said coolly.

"Till we meet again, señorita," Steve corrected her gently. He smiled boyishly, wistfully, his blue eyes humble and earnest. "I wish—I wish. . . ."

Suddenly she smiled also. "I am usually on the rear balcony alone each night about ten o'clock," she said softly. *"Adios,"* she said, and was gone.

AT ten the stars were bright over Lucero, and a silver moon was rising in the east. Steve Rolph came

over the wall into the garden behind the house. Up on the balcony a white-clad figure whispered to come up. Steve jumped and grasped the wrought-iron uprights, pulled himself up lightly and swung over the balcony railing to stand beside the girl. His rugged, pleasant face brightened with a smile. "Hello," he said.

"You are prompt, señor," said Juanita. She laughed. "Let us introduce ourselves. I am Juanita Vargas."

"I'm Steve Rolph."

"What brings you to Lucero?"

Steve explained that he was advance agent for a big trail herd on its way to town from western Sonora. He had been sent ahead to arrange for shipping cars, since Lucero's railroad facilities were poor. Juanita drew him out, and he told about himself, the thrills and dangers that met a drifting Texas cowpuncher.

In turn Juanita talked of herself. Her V-99 was preyed upon by rustlers, her own cowpunchers were secretly in league with the thieves, there was only her foreman to depend on. The only other Vargas, her brother, had been killed in a duel. She was alone.

"It's hard for you," said Steve.

Juanita shrugged and tossed her head. "I can face it. That is life."

A silence fell between them, and as the Texan watched the play of moonlight and shadow across the girl's lovely face, his eyes were moody, strange.

In the house to the rear across the alleyway an upstairs shutter creaked. Juanita looked over there, then at the moon, and rose, saying it was late and he must go. "My old *dueña*—as you say, chaperon—will be looking for me. Thank you for a very surprising evening," she said.

"Surprising?" he asked.

Juanita laughed. "It seems so strange that a man should have a stolen meeting with a girl on a moonlit balcony—and then talk of cows and ranches, never speaking one word of love!"

"And would you believe me if I did say I loved you?" asked Steve, smiling.

She shook her head. "Of course not! Many men have tried to make love to me, Steve."

"Well, then. . . ." Steve shrugged. "I've never been around girls much, and I don't savvy the play. And besides"—he paused and looked at her, groping for words to express the deep feeling that gripped him—"this evenin' here is somethin' fine and worth rememberin' for me, Juanita, and a false move would spoil it all."

"That was well said," she answered softly, drawing closer. She held out her hand. "*Buenas noches,* Steve."

Steve took her hand gently, almost fearfully, as though he touched something very fragile and precious. Her eyes met his, unfathomable dark pools, challenging, alluring. Suddenly the nearness of her loveliness, the perfume of her hair, went to Steve's head like wine. He swept her into his arms, kissed her again and again. She struggled, then relaxed in his grasp. At last she freed herself and pushed him away.

"You must go now," she gasped. "Please, Steve."

"I must see you again—tomorrow night. . . ."

"*Sí, sí;* but go now, quickly—*Adios!*" She hurried inside, and the door shut behind her.

As Steve departed the shutter across the alley was being closed.

NEXT night as Steve approached the garden wall, three masked men came at him out of the shadows. Rushing silently with upraised knives, they nearly took him by surprise, and for a moment it was touch and go. They seemed all about him; the air was alive with gleaming steel.

Steve felt a point prick his side even as he leaped away. He caught a descending wrist and wrenched it hard, spun sideways and knocked a man down. Then he was in the clear,

his back against the wall and his two six-guns in his hands.

A gun roared, and the nearest of the charging assassins staggered and cried out. The other two hesitated. Another shot kicked up the dirt at their feet; they seized their wounded companion and dashed down a narrow passageway between two buildings. The Texan held his fire and watched them go.

He waited for a time, but no one appeared. At last he sheathed his guns, entered the moonlit garden, and greeted Juanita.

"They tried to kill me . . . I don't know why. Maybe they made a mistake."

There was a strange, hard smile on Juanita's face. "It was not a mistake," she said. "No, don't come up here—stand there and listen. I saw through your lies and pretenses last night. Well, I was pretending also. I know who you are—my foreman described you to me, and I recognized you the moment I saw you, Señor Rustler!

"I am a woman with only a woman's weapons, but I have beaten you. Your alliance with Diego Herrera is now broken!"

Steve stared at her. "What do you mean?"

"You pretend ignorance, just as you did last night," said Juanita. "Then I will tell you again what you already know. Diego would force me into marriage in any way possible, and one way is to make me lose the rancho. He has me watched always. He bribes my hands, lets you rustle my cattle, so that my V-99 will go to ruin, and then I will have no one to turn to except him.

"Well, I dropped my handkerchief purposely yesterday, and when I heard Diego's spy open his shutter I let you kiss me—so that Diego would hear, and in his mad jealousy turn against you! You'll rustle no more of my cattle—either you run away or Diego will kill you."

Pain and wonder shone in Steve's blue eyes, and Juanita laughed. "Go now, you fool! Don't you understand that that was no kiss of love I gave you last night? It was a kiss of death!"

Steve stood and looked up at her in the moonlight. After a moment he laughed also, mirthlessly. Then with a rush he made his way up into the balcony and caught Juanita in his arms. She struck at him with a little knife—he wrested it away, pulled her to him, kissed her hard, savagely. "So you didn't mean any of it?" he said. "It was all a frame-up then?" Suddenly his fury passed; he pushed her away gently, departed without a word.

Outside the garden wall Steve stopped. There was a scratch on his side, another on his arm, from Juanita's knife—both trifles. But what was this burning pain in his heart? All his wild life he had been footloose and carefree, but now. . . . "Something's happened to me," Steve said aloud.

He stood there for a long time, and then at last he moved on. A few minutes later he was in the crowded Montes *cantina,* confronting Diego Herrera at the bar.

"You're Herrera? I'm Steve Rolph. I hear you've been lookin' for me, Herrera. Some friends of yours just brought me your regards."

Diego shrugged. "Why should I look for you, señor?" he purred, smiling. "I do not even know you. There's much silly gossip about me, but don't listen to it. Will you drink with me?"

But the glitter in Diego's eyes betrayed his hate.

Steve said, "To blazes with talk—we savvy what this is all about. Go for your gun, Herrera, and we'll settle things right now!" Steve's hands slid toward the butts of his guns.

In an instant from all sides of the *cantina* a half dozen gunmen covered Steve. Diego had not moved. The Texan shrugged, dropped his hands. Diego laughed and said, "I am a *caballero,*

señor; I have my killing done for me, just as I have my boots polished."

"Hombre, the bullet to kill me ain't been molded yet," said Steve. He turned away. A huge fat man with fierce mustaches came bustling up—the town *alcalde*. He fawned on Diego like a dog on its master, scolded Steve pompously. "A bad one—a killer, making threats! *Americano,* we are witnesses that whatever happens to you after this, the law will not be responsible."

Steve shouldered the *alcalde* aside and went out. Riding up the street, he was tense, ready. He understood his enemy's treacherous, stealthy nature. Diego would never attack openly if he could avoid it. He preferred to strike underhandedly, secretly.

As Steve passed the next *cantina* a pair of struggling men burst out of the doorway ahead of a shouting crowd. Somehow the thing seemed forced. Steve recognized the play. This fake fight was staged so that he would be shot "by accident."

One of the "fighters" drew, aimed past his pretended opponent at Steve, but Steve beat him to the smoke. The ruffian fell, groaning. The crowd raged: *"Caramba,* shooting a stranger for no reason!" Steve turned in his saddle, kept his gun trained on them as he rode. Then he passed the limits of Lucero, and disappeared.

NEXT day as Juanita started on the return ride toward her own rancho, Manuel touched her arm. "Look, señorita, there's the man I told you about—the leader of the rustlers. I just learned his name is Red Kaber. If I were only younger and quicker, I'd show him. . . ."

This passing stranger was six feet tall, but his blue eyes were hard and shifty rather than level, his hair was a carrot-colored flame instead of reddish brown like Steve's.

Juanita caught her breath. She stopped at the railway station to make inquiries.

"Steve Rolph?" said the agent. *"Sí, señorita,* he ordered cars from me. He's with the Flying Z Rancho, over in the Yaqui country. All the hands there are wild *Tejanos.* Their herd arrives in ten days—*por Dios,* that crew will tear Lucero apart!"

Juanita said to herself, "So he was telling the truth, after all!"

"Why are you so sad, señorita?" asked Manuel as they rode on.

"I made a terrible mistake," Juanita replied.

When they reached the V-99 hacienda, Steve Rolph was there. Juanita gasped, "Steve! You here!"

"Hello, Juanita. I thought you might need a cowhand," Steve said.

"I made a terrible mistake, Steve; I thought you were that rustler boss, and so—"

"I understand," said Steve.

He had seen her as a poised great lady, a temptress, a tigress; now she seemed misty-eyed, humble and as ashamed as a little girl.

"What must you think of me, Steve? I—I never acted like that to a man before. And now I have put your life in danger—you, an honest innocent man!"

"I'm glad it happened so," said Steve. "If you hadn't figgered me as the rustler we'd have passed by each other silently. I'd never have known you, Juanita!"

"But knowing me will bring you only trouble," she answered anxiously. "Diego is your bitter enemy now; you must go away at once before he kills you!"

He shook his head in refusal. She cried, "You must understand! Diego is a devil; you can't win against him. His men are out hunting you now, and I will be to blame if they kill you!"

Steve grinned. "I take a heap of killin'," he said. "Diego's had two tries at me already, and I'm still here. Don't you worry about me, Juanita. And you really need someone to help, don't you? Well then, I'm your man!"

He talked with old Manuel for a while; the grizzled foreman gave him the lay of the land, and got much ammunition and a sack of provisions for him. Then Steve told Juanita good-by for a while and rode away.

As he rode across open range an hour later a hidden sniper opened up on him at a range of six hundred yards. Diego Herrera had put five hundred pesos reward on the Texan's head to spur his killers on. But the blood money was not earned that day. Steve spurred his roan pony and raced for cover like a streak. None of the bullets even came close to him.

After a time he halted long enough to cook a hasty meal, then rode far through the gathering darkness before stopping to camp without a fire.

He picketed his bronc close by. The roan was scarcely breathing hard after the long run.

"He thinks he's goin' to hunt us down like a pair of rabbits, bronc," said Steve. "Well, we'll see about that. Reckon it's time to take a hand in this game!"

Red Kaber's rustler gang raided Juanita's herds stealthily and constantly, a few head at a time. Now Steve started to make raids on the raiders.

He roved the V-99 ranges, elusively and swiftly. He hung about the edges of the gang. At supper time he would shoot from long range at their cooking fire and riddle the coffee pot. At night his bullets whining overhead broke their slumbers. When they tried to track him, he circled back on his trail and blazed away at them as they passed. He never hit any of the rustlers, and never aimed to. Shooting a man down from ambush was unthinkable in his code.

But he was always after them; near, yet out of reach. His bullets flew uncomfortably close to them, as annoying as hornets. Kaber's gang was kept in constant uproar, and its thieving activities dwindled.

Steve was on the watch to catch one of Kaber's men out alone. Whenever he sighted a lone rustler riding he closed in and challenged him to holster-play.

Against the Texan's lightning gun-throwing, the rustlers had no show in fair fight. Most of Kaber's men were cheap bullies, *cantina* loafers who had seemed hard only because the weight of Diego's influence was behind them. Steve winged two rustlers in gun duels; a third one whom he cornered was too scared to draw. Finally Red Kaber swore savagely, dropped all rustling, and turned out his gang to hunt Steve down.

But that tinhorn crew was no match for Steve at Indian warfare. Steve's roan bronc was one of the best cow-ponies that ever came out of Texas, and could outlast any of the rustlers' mounts. They were poor trackers, and Steve often shook them off his trail on stony ground. Once they nearly trapped him, riding in from both ends of an arroyo with Steve in between; but he rode up the steep side slope and got away in a shower of bullets.

One day Red Kaber went to Lucero alone while his men hunted Steve far to the south in the Morena Hills. Steve circled back north, and at sundown, near the rustlers' camp at Rinaldo Springs, he met Kaber coming from town.

Steve was waiting, leaning against a rock. Kaber dismounted fifty yards away and walked forward slowly. The two had recognized each other instinctively.

"Your hair's plenty redder'n mine, Kaber," said Steve mildly.

"Is that what yuh came to tell me about?" growled Kaber. His twitching fingers crept inch by inch toward the holster on his thigh.

"Take it easy, Red," said Steve. "You did me a big favor once without knowin' it, so I'll call it quits if you high-tail it out o' these parts pronto."

Kaber's creeping fingers had reached his gun butt, and with a snarl he drew.

He led the way by a fraction of a second, and the Texan needed all his speed to save himself. Steve whipped his gun to a level and pulled the trigger with a single convulsive jerk. Kaber, hit dead center, lurched sideways, and his bullet went wild.

The fierce rustler boss kept his feet, trying to bring his wavering gun to bear on his enemy. Steve lunged, took the gun from Kaber's limp hand, and laid him gently down. Three minutes later Kaber was dead. Steve left him there, where his pals would soon find him.

That night Steve went to the hacienda. He crept up under cover of darkness, for the treacherous V-99 vaqueros would probably pot-shoot him on sight.

Juanita was alone in the spacious living room. She was startled, yet overjoyed, at the sight of Steve; she had been worried frantic over his safety during the week he had been out on the range. Manuel came in at her call. Steve told them of Kaber's death.

"This means the end of rustling till Diego gets a new leader," said Manuel, pleased. "But why do you gamble with your life like this, amigo?"

"To keep 'em busy, so they don't have time for rustlin'," answered Steve. "Prob'ly it won't be long till I have a showdown with Diego. If I c'n get him, it's the finish of the whole murderin', crooked layout around here."

"Get Diego!" repeated Juanita, starting.

"What's the matter; you don't care about him, do you?" asked Steve.

"Of course not; I hate him. But you can't get Diego—I feel it. You will only die."

"Always Diego!" Steve laughed. "He's got you all buffaloed, as if he was more'n human! Well, soon I'll put a bullet in this Diego, and see if he falls!"

Manuel shook hands with Steve and left. When they were alone Juanita looked at the tall Texan intently. "Why do you do all this for me, Steve?"

"Because I love you," he answered quietly.

Many men had told Juanita that, without effect. In Lucero they spoke of her as one without a heart. But this rugged, daredevil cowboy who proved his affection with deeds instead of words, stirred her strangely, and his simple statement drew tears to her dark eyes.

"Since that night?" she asked at last.

"Yes."

"I have never loved, Steve. And now—I don't know." She twisted her slim hands nervously. "I miss you terribly, amigo. I am mad with worry over your safety, but whether it is love. . . ."

"Don't fret about that now," Steve said gently. "Time enough to talk about it when we're out of the woods. In the meantime—well, you can't keep a man from hopin'."

He arose. It was time to go; gunmen might come searching this way. He made no attempt to kiss Juanita. He only pressed her hand gently and smiled down at her, all the stern fighting lines in his face smoothed away.

Juanita's soft good night was like a benediction. As Steve rode away, though he was in the most dangerous jam of his life, his heart was singing.

THE next day at sunset Steve topped a rise, saw a great cloud of dust in the distance and rode toward it. A huge milling herd of cattle was being bedded down for the night on a creek bank six miles from Lucero. Steve's long, lonely waiting was over, and he whooped for joy and spurred forward as he realized it. The Flying Z, his spread—it had come at last!

Steve rode into the trail camp as the trail crew was eating supper.

"It's Steve!" There was foreman

Bob, Shorty, Whistlin' Jack, Slim, the whole dozen of them—his friends. They fell on the newcomer with those laughing blows and curses which were the only display of affection among men of their kind.

After supper was over Steve said, "Boys, I've been playin' target to a sneakin' coyote, and I want a showdown with him tomorrow. This hombre's top dog around here; he's got a big outfit of tough guns, and I figger if I had somebody to sort of stand behind me to back up my play—"

"Yo're shore circle-herdin' yore subject plenty, Steve, but yuh don't seem to get to the point," drawled Bob, grinning. He was like the others, kindly, courteous, mild-spoken—and an unchained devil in a fight. On their turbulent ranch they fought rustlers, badmen, and marauding Yaquis for buckaroos' wages, and when they went to town they fought for pleasure. Wild *Tejanos*—wild Texans all!

"To hell with the details!" said Shorty. "Is there fightin' in it?"

"Yeah," said Steve.

Shorty whooped joyfully, and the others echoed. "That's all we want to know!"

AT noon the next day the Flying Z trail herd poured into the shipping cars. Their job done, the Texans looked to their guns. Then they followed Steve down the street, ready for war.

On they went to the Montes *cantina*. Diego was not there, nor were any of his gunmen there either.

"Where's Diego?" Steve demanded.

"At the Vargas town house."

Steve led the way there, wondering. As they rode up to the house the front door opened and Juanita came out on Diego's arm. The girl's gray-haired old *dueña* lingered in the background.

Steve said, "You'd better go, Juanita. I have something to say to Herrera in private."

Diego grinned, as at some huge joke. "Speak then—there is nothing that the future Señora Herrera cannot hear."

"What does he mean, Juanita?" asked Steve.

Juanita said, "I am going to marry Diego this afternoon."

Steve jerked as from a blow. "Why, you can't mean that!" he exclaimed.

"It's true," said Juanita.

For Steve it was like the end of the world. "But you said you hated him!" he muttered desperately.

Juanita's lips parted as though she were about to speak. Then she sighed and shook her head slowly, her lovely face haggard and pale as death. "Please, let's not talk about it," she said.

Diego's heavy-lidded, glowing eyes made Steve think of some cruel jungle cat that had just caught its prey.

"You don't know much about women, *Señor Americano,*" Diego purred. "Don't you understand that hate is often close to love? Deep in her heart she has loved me all the time" He pressed the girl's arm possessively. "*Sí, querida?*"

Juanita nodded, her lips twitching.

A dozen desperate questions whirled in Steve's brain. Was she so fickle, then? Had her tender words to him been false? In the face of all that had happened, this sudden marriage to Diego seemed monstrous, impossible. But here were the facts, and all talk seemed useless now.

Steve looked at the ground. "Reckon my friends and I'd better be going, then," he said at last. "Come on, boys, the party's off."

"But stay for the ceremony as my guest, señor," urged Diego, with a sneering smile. "The *alcalde* will marry us in an hour.

Steve ignored Diego, looked at Juanita for a long moment. Her face was as expressionless as a lovely ivory mask, but her eyes darted desperately. "I won't be seein' you again, Juanita," he said. "Good luck, and *adios.*"

*"Adios,"* she whispered.

Steve led his men to their horses without a backward glance. They rode out of Lucero.

Steve said, "I won't want to sell my share in the outfit now, Bob. Our business is all through here—let's head back home right away."

"How about your showdown?" asked Shorty.

"She's marryin' the hombre," explained Steve. "I can't fight her husband-to-be, can I?"

The Texans' spirits were dampened by their loss of a good fight and by Steve's sorrow. They had little to say as they rode. "Wonder where all that hombre's gunmen was?" remarked one. "She looked awful sad and worried for a bride," put in another. "The whole thing seems strange," said a third.

"Well, women are peculiar critters," observed Whistlin' Jack sagely.

Steve heard nothing; he rode like a man in a dream, unconscious of everything but the pain in his heart.

The road led past the V-99 ranch house, and the Texans kept on without stopping. But a hoarse cry came from the house. "Steve! Steve!" It was Manuel, crawling across the porch on his hands and knees.

They stopped and ran inside. Manuel's head was battered and bloody, his bare feet charred with terrible burns, his face contorted with pain. "Thank God you've come, Steve!" he gasped. "Maybe it's not too late!"

"Get some bandages and things, boys," said Steve. "What's happened, Manuel?" Manuel told them while they treated his wounds.

Diego had carried out his threat at last—he stopped asking Juanita, and simply took her. He and his swarm of gunmen had come to the V-99 that morning; again Juanita had scornfully refused his proposal, laughed fearlessly when he threatened her. Then Diego's men seized Manuel, the girl's oldest friend, and put him to the torture before Juanita's eyes, with hot branding irons held against his feet. The vaquero endured it with locked lips, but Juanita could not bear it. Fearless for herself, she could not let another suffer for her. She screamed at them to stop, gave in, and signed a marriage agreement.

After that Diego and his gang took Juanita away. One ruffian paused long enough to fire a quick, finishing shot at Manuel, but by a lucky chance the bullet only grazed Manuel's head.

Now the cowardly *alcalde* would perform the marriage ceremony as Diego commanded. Diego ruled here, his brazen, lawless will was the only law, no one could stop him except—"Except you, Steve!" Manuel finished. "You must kill Diego!"

But Steve hesitated. "I saw her face to face, and she said nothing of this. If she didn't want to marry him, why didn't she speak then, so I could save her?"

Manuel studied a moment, then understanding dawned in his eyes. "You say none of his men were to be seen? Well, I know Diego! Don't you see, he had them hidden in ambush, ready to shoot you and your men down. Juanita had to keep silent, under threat of death to you!"

Steve's puzzled brow cleared. "Of course, that's it." His entire being tingled with a fierce joy. Outwardly he was calm, but in his mind two words began throbbing like a pulse—kill Diego, kill Diego!

"You'll be all right now, Manuel. Come on boys—ride!" Shorty let out a whoop as they vaulted into their saddles and raced for Lucero.

At the edge of town Steve pulled up sharply. "Slow now; watch for an ambush," he warned. They went on slowly, watching both sides of the street with their hands on their guns.

Their deliberate, silent advance had something deadly about it. Chattering loungers hushed as they passed, peons got out of their way. As they passed the *alcalde's* office, the fat official came out, dressed in formal black.

"Where are you goin'?" demanded Steve.

"To the Vargas house," said the *alcalde* pompously, "to marry the señorita to Señor Herrera."

"Stay where you are," snapped Steve. He beckoned to a small boy and handed him a coin. "*Muchacho,* go to Herrera and say for me there'll be no wedding today. Tell him to get his men and be ready—I'm comin' for a talk with him."

The urchin nodded and dashed away. The *alcalde* drew himself up. "How dare you interfere?" he blustered. "Everything about the marriage is strictly legal and in order. The señorita has signed this marriage agreement." He held up a paper. "I warn you, if you disturb the peace. . . ."

Terrible rage swept over Steve. He leaped from the saddle and seized the *alcalde* by the collar, flung him face down into the dust. "You mealy-mouthed cur," the young man snarled. "You help force her into Diego's arms—you'd use your office for that!" His twitching hands fell on his gun butts.

The *alcalde* read death in the Texan's blazing eyes. He rose to his knees and begged frantically for his life, promised everything, agreed that the authorities would bring no charges against the Texans in case of a shooting scrape. Steve mastered his fury and let go of his guns.

The boy returned after delivering Steve's message to Herrera at the Montes. He whispered to the *alcalde.* The trembling official turned to Steve and pleaded, "Don't turn my town into a battlefield, señor. There's no need of shedding innocent blood. Send all your men out of town, and Diego will send his. Then you and Diego can settle your differences alone."

"And what of Juanita?"

"She is safe with Señora Garcia, her *dueña,* at the Vargas house."

Steve's friends warned him against treachery, protested against being cheated out of a good fight. But Steve said there was no need of getting them killed needlessly. He accepted the *alcalde's* proposition, and the official sent a messenger in to the Montes.

In a few minutes a score of heavily armed, swarthy men came riding. "These are all of Diego's men," said the *alcalde.*

"S'pose he's kept a couple of aces up his sleeve, Steve?" whispered Bob anxiously.

"Then I'll take care of them too," said Steve. He silenced his friends' protests and sent them on their way.

The two groups rode out of town side by side. The Texans, although fewer in number, were cool and cheerful. Diego's sullen gang eyed them savagely.

"Looks like a ruction after all," said Shorty hopefully.

"Yeah, and it's got to start on horseback, too," remarked Whistlin' Jack. "Them greasers' skittish broncs'll start buckin' at the first shot, and spoil their aim." He began to whistle *Lone Cowboy* as though he had not a care in the world.

When the riders were gone the *alcalde* said, "Señor, Diego is ready for you—he waits at the Montes *cantina,* alone." Then he lumbered away.

Steve loosened his six-guns in the holster and went warily down the side of the street, slipping from one building to the next silently as an Indian, watching everywhere. The cold fury that gripped him only made his mind more alert, his taut muscles more sure. The setting sun threw long shadows, and everything seemed deserted and quiet as death.

Noiselessly Steve came to an open window where a man with a rifle waited. With a gasp of surprise the man threw his rifle to his shoulder. Steve whipped out his gun and fired. The man disappeared from the window, and the rifle fell on the sill and slid out to the ground.

The Texan smiled grimly . . . he had expected treachery. He passed several more watchers at doors and

windows, but under his steely gaze they made no move.

When he reached the deserted cabin next door to the *cantina* he was so intent on his goal that he did not look behind him. A creaking door warned him—he wheeled and leaped aside just as a shotgun roared. Steve staggered under a great shock as white-hot pain seared his side. He drew as he fell against the wall, and fired.

The assassin doubled over his shotgun and the second barrel's charge went into the floor. Steve fired twice more to make sure, and a dark-bearded man tumbled down the steps and lay dead in the dust. Steve switched his other gun to the right-hand holster and staggered forward into the Montes *cantina*.

"So, my work has been done for me!" mocked Diego. "I don't even need to draw—you are a dead man now!"

Diego, lounging at the far end of the bar seemed alone in the *cantina*. But Steve felt sure there was a gunman concealed somewhere; this snake wouldn't ever fight man to man. He sucked in a deep breath, his head clearing, and looked about. At the near end of the bar stood an empty wine-barrel; at the barrel's edge a set of fingertips just showed, and the Texan knew Diego was not alone.

Steve pulled himself erect by force of will and walked toward the barrel, facing Diego. He clutched at the bar with his left hand, and at the same instant he kicked out hard. The empty barrel went over and the hidden gunman rolled out from under it. Diego snarled and drew.

For the moment Steve's hand was swift and steady again; he fired just as Diego cleared leather, and saw the latter reel backward. Steve then turned as the gunman who had been hidden leaped up, and sent the man down again with a bullet. Swinging back to face Diego, he saw the Mexican's gun come up and spout fire. Then he emptied his .45 into Diego's chest.

He staggered out and down the street, dazed, his empty gun dangling in his hand. A red mist hung before his eyes. He reeled blindly against a passerby. "Take me to the Vargas house," he muttered.

The peon grasped Steve gently. "Let us stop at the doctor's first, señor," he said, and as he spoke, Steve went limp in the man's arms.

STEVE came to in a bed in the Vargas house, his wounds dressed and the scent of ether in his nostrils. The doctor and Shorty were standing at his bedside.

Shorty told of the fracas with the Herrera gang. "Them coyotes got on the prod, and we had to pacify 'em. Three of our boys got hurt bad, but we blasted six of them hombres clean to the golden shore. They was locoed enough to ride skittish broncs to a gunfight."

Steve asked for Juanita. The old doctor said, "You are seriously hurt, señor. Seeing her now would only excite you. In a few days, perhaps."

The old, reckless grin flashed across Steve's haggard face. With a muffled groan he raised himself on one elbow and said feebly, "The bullet to kill me ain't been molded yet, Doc. Now will you send Juanita in here, or do I have to get up and look for her myself?"

With a startled exclamation, the doctor went out with Shorty to fetch her.

Presently Juanita came in alone. "Steve!" she said. Tears glistened in her dark eyes, yet she was smiling. She knelt at the bedside and stroked his hair. He called her name and groped for her hand.

"You must get well—you must live, Steve, for me!" she whispered. Her lovely face drew nearer, her warm red lips pressed to his, clung thrillingly, tenderly. It was not a kiss of death this time—it was a kiss of life, of love. Steve Rolph's fondest dreams had come true.

# Marion's Option

By Lawrence A. Keating

**Life had suddenly become mighty complicated for Marion and Jerry, for the girl had innocently brought the wrath of the law down upon her pretty head. But Jerry wasn't a deputy for nothing, and he rode away pronto to get the hombre who had threatened to mar his future happiness with the girl he loved.**

BEFORE her foam-flecked pinto pony came to a full stop, Marion Poole had sprung from the saddle, tossed her reins over the beast's ears and was running with lithe grace toward the low-roofed stoop of the Triple B ranch house that stood disconsolate and lonely on a wide stretch of somber gray range.

"Jerry!" she called excitedly. "Jerry! Jerry Bayer!"

Boots sounded inside and at the screen door appeared a tall, straight figure. Sandy hair always tousled and awry gave Bayer the look of a mischievous, freckle-faced boy; but the

nickeled under-sheriff's badge pinned on his shirt and the sinewy nut-brown forearms, showing where his denim sleeves were rolled back, marked the tanned ranch owner a man of perhaps twenty-three.

He held a cup of steaming coffee in one hand. Recognizing the slender, eager-eyed girl in a fresh gingham print frock, with her dark hair wind-blown over her forehead and down the smooth nape of her neck, Jerry broke into a broad grin.

"Marion!" He thrust open the screen door and hurried toward her. Suddenly remembering the cup, he turned back to deposit it on the floor of the stoop. When he straightened again he was in time to catch her impetuous, flying figure in his arms.

"I've sold it, Jerry!" she panted happily. "I—I've sold your Triple B!"

Bayer started. He peered at her, his look carrying incredulity and amazement. "You sold my spread?"

"Yes! And now we can leave poky old Alleposa at last! I won't have to clerk in Sam Hinkle's musty hotel any longer. And—and we can get that perfectly lovely diamond ring at Turner's jewelry store that we've wanted so long, and be married. We can go to your Uncle Bert's ranch in Wyoming and he can fire that thief of a Bensinger, the superintendent, and you can manage—"

"Wait!" He shook her gently, insistently, while his gray eyes deepened their mystified expression. "You actually did sell my ranch, the Triple B, then? But who bought it?"

With a hand pressed to her bosom as if to slow the racing of her heart, Marion Poole uttered a happy, triumphant laugh. Her warm brown eyes danced in ecstasy as she nodded with such vigor that glossy chestnut hair suddenly rippled downward to obscure her vision. Laughing still, she flung it back with a careless toss of her head.

"A man named Jack Wallace. Yesterday when he registered at the hotel he asked where there was good grazing land for sale. Of course I told him right off about yours. So he rode out to see it and this morning paid me a hundred dollars to sign a five-day option. He—he didn't know when he could come to complete the deal, but wanted to make sure of the ranch. He'll be here sometime today.

"Just think!" she exclaimed, her piquant oval face flushed with exultation. "After a year and a half of waiting, the Triple B is sold at last! It means you—we—can be married and go to your uncle's spread. He'll fire that Bensinger person and make you manager. I took reservations on Number 8 at midnight tonight, and I paid Abe Turner the hundred dollars on the ring, and I told Tom Farley, the justice of the peace, he can marry us just a few hours from now, and—"

"But Marion, hold on! How could you sell the Triple B? You don't own it—*I* do!"

She drew her hands from his and began to rearrange her glinting mass of hair. "Pooh, what of that? Would you have me lose the only customer we've had all this time?" But watching his face, Marion slowly assumed a puzzled look. "Aren't you glad about it? Why, Jerry Bayer, what's wrong?"

He swallowed hard and turned away. Instantly the girl ran after him and clutched his arm. "Gosh!" Bayer groaned in deep dismay. "I—I sold the Triple B to Heck Stevens an hour ago!"

Marion blinked. She started to smile as if she thought him joking. Then she flashed him a sharply penetrating look, while the merest ghost of a frown flashed across her smooth forehead. Her face slowly drained of blood; but with a quick shrug the girl brightened anew.

"You made a deal with Heck Stevens? That's odd. But it won't make any difference, except the sale to Mr. Wallace is off then. The main thing

is that the spread is sold at last. I'm so happy! Because it means so much to us, and we can be mar—"

"But don't you realize?" he cut in worriedly. "Marion, you've sold property you didn't own. That's wrong; it's against the law. My dear, you could be sent to the penitentiary for swindling!"

She stared at him in startled disbelief that slowly changed to panic. Cold fingers seemed to close around her heart. Uttering a low fearful gasp, she swayed as from sudden dizziness and groped for support. In the nick of time Bayer sprang forward to catch her in his arms.

"I—I'm all right," Marion protested weakly. But she was grateful when he drew her close and held her trembling body, until the first terrific shock of realization passed away.

The throb of nearing hoofs caused both of them to look up. Marion daubed a filmy mite of handkerchief to her eyes, blinked, and stared an instant at the approaching horseman. Then her hand shot out to grasp Bayer's wrist.

"It's Mr. Wallace!" she ejaculated. "Oh, Jerry, what shall we do?"

"Wallace? The hombre who bought the option?" At her quick nod he squinted reflectively. "Er — leave everything to me, Marion. I reckon this thing can be patched up somehow. It's got to be. How much did you agree to for the spread?"

"Five thousand dollars."

He nodded. "Same price Heck Stevens paid me. It's lucky I have the cash in my pocket right this minute. Now don't worry. And try not to look scared, Marion—smile!"

She strove valiantly to do so, but her wan effort betrayed harried uncertainty as she watched Jack Wallace swing from his saddle and stride forward. A short, dark-mustached man in brown corduroys, he moved with nervous, jerky confidence. The muzzle of a six-gun showed below the skirt of his coat as he came to a halt before them. Wallace shoved the Stetson back on his head, rubbed his rather sharp nose, and nodded curtly.

"Reckon yo're the tenant on this here spread, Mister? Prob'ly Miss Poole told yuh I got an option to buy it. Well, I'm here to pay the principal an' take the place. How soon can yuh vacate?"

Jerry did not answer at once, but with a gesture invited the new arrival to seat himself on the stoop. Marion, he noted, watched first Wallace's face, then his. Her red lips were quivering.

"I'm sorry, but there seems to be a little mix-up," the rancher began hesitantly. "Reckon I'll have to pay back that hundred dollars you gave for the option."

"Pay it back?" The other scowled from Jerry to the girl. "Why, no yuh won't. I'm buyin' the place. Come to take possession right away if I can."

Bayer shook his head. "The fact is, the spread belongs to me, or rather, it did. I sold it awhile ago to Heck Stevens."

Wallace muttered an exclamation as he jerked up from the stoop. His dark, quick-moving eyes showed him deeply puzzled. "Yuh mean to say this gal doesn't own the place? But she sold it to me!"

Marion nodded guiltily. "I'm sorry, Mr. Wallace, really I am. You see—"

"Sorry?" His voice had a hard ring. "What kind of a gyp scheme yuh two running, anyhow? Takin' money under false pretenses, eh?"

"Hold on. We can adjust this to suit you, I'm sure." Jerry drew out a thick wad of bills that made Jack Wallace blink. "Suppose I return the money for your option? That will square matters so you haven't lost anything."

He peeled off a hundred-dollar note and extended it. But with a curse the other struck his hand away. He stepped close to the alarmed girl, who tried to meet his accusing eyes but could not. "I tell yuh I want

this spread, not the hundred dollars! Young lady, this is a swindle, nothin' but a deliberate swindle! Of all the—"

"Wait a minute! I tell you again I've sold the ranch already. You can't get it. So why not be reasonable? Here's your money. You haven't lost anything, have you?"

The visitor snapped around, his face purpling with anger. "Don't yuh talk to me!" Wallace roared. "By gosh, I'll see what's to be done about this here outrage!" He whirled back to Marion and seized her arm. "Yuh come along to town, young lady. I'll shore have the law on yuh plenty for this!"

With a sharp lunge Bayer jerked the fellow's hand free of Marion's arm. Wallace fell back. His other hand swished aside his corduroy jacket to grip the hard black butt of his holstered gun. For a brief second it seemed as if he would draw and shoot the unarmed Jerry where he stood. But slowly the stranger's eyes took on a glint of cunning and his hand fell away.

"Say, ain't that a lawman's star yo're wearin'?"

Jerry frowned at the nickeled badge. "Yes."

"All right, then! Arrest this gal. Yuh know what she's done!"

Silence fell as the rancher shifted weight, scowling down at the dusty toes of his riding boots. "But this isn't a robbery or a shootin', and you got to have a warrant to arrest anybody for fraud or takin' money under false pretenses."

"Tryin' to let her off so she can escape, eh? Young feller, either yuh sell me the ranch accordin' to the terms o' this here option"—he waved a paper under Jerry's nose—"or else take this gal to town an' I *will* swear out a warrant!"

Again the chill struck Marion Poole's heart, and with lips pressed worriedly, she watched the face of the man who for the last year and a half she had planned to marry. At last, uttering a deep sigh of resignation, she turned toward her pinto pony ten yards away. "I guess we'll have to go with him, Jerry."

He stared at her retreating back. Yes, they would have to go. . . .

Without a word Jerry turned, picked up the untasted cup of coffee and disappeared inside the ranch house. Before he emerged Bayer donned a calfskin jacket, sombrero and forty-five. He strode to the corral where he roped and saddled a tawny mustang, and while the others waited, mounted, he led the animal out of the enclosure. After replacing the gate bars, Jerry swung into the saddle and silently started with them toward Alleposa, twelve miles distant.

Jack Wallace kept his own counsel as he fumbled for a corncob pipe, filled and lighted it. But his hard, unfriendly eyes played from Marion Poole to young Bayer, and from his thin lips from time to time dropped half-audible grumbling phrases:

"Swindlers! Damned outrage, that's what it is. I'll show that gal she can't make a fool outa me!"

Jerry, riding close beside Marion, could think of nothing to say. His eyes strove to carry encouragement, but the deep anxiety on his face belied it. The girl clerk in Sam Hinkle's Commercial Hotel rode with a heavy heart, scarcely able to credit her senses. She was going back to Alleposa to be arrested for taking money under false pretenses!

A brief half hour ago she had ridden from town with eagerness welling in her breast—eagerness and anticipation to give Jerry Bayer the news for which they had waited so long. Marion brushed a hand over her eyes, almost as if she wanted to wipe away the awfulness of this thing she had done. Of course she had not dreamed that signing the option to Jack Wallace could amount to so much!

Why, she had not intended cheating anyone, but only to make certain

that Wallace, searching for ranch land to buy, should meet Jerry Bayer, who had long wanted to sell. Jerry desired to liquidate so that he might leave for his uncle's in Wyoming to become superintendent of the far-flung Bar 30.

Jerry's uncle mentioned in almost every letter that he feared his present manager, Bensinger, was secretly stealing cattle and money. Marion recalled a few lines of a recent letter:

> I'll have to fire Bensinger, as I can't rest easy with the hombre around. What I need is a young fellow like yourself, who knows steers and who can be trusted. I'm getting on in years and the place will be yours some day anyhow.

But land and beef prices here had been so low of late that Bayer had been unable to sell his Triple B for any reasonable price. And, he declared, he would not care to leave for Wyoming until he could afford to take Marion as his wife.

They rode down the wide, unpaved main street of Alleposa, drawing rein at length before the red-painted sheet-iron jail. "Let's get inside quick," Jerry urged. "There'll be a crowd around in no time."

Just then Tom Farley, local justice of the peace, came rolling along the plank sidewalk, his peculiar gait prompted by the man's great girth. Farley slowed, his face thrust forward.

"Wal!" he boomed in a vibrant bass. "Are yuh all set for the weddin', Marion? . . . Hey, Tex!" he roared. "Tell folks I'm gonna perform a hitchin' ceremony here right off, joinin' Marion Poole and our esteemed citizen, Jerry Bayer, in the holy rivets o' matrimony!"

The girl sprang quickly from her saddle and ran to Farley. "Oh, Tom," she gasped tremulously. "I—you see—oh, *please*, Tom, don't tell people. Not now!"

"G'wan, yuh only get married once, don't yuh? Wal, some folks make it two-three times, but I hope yuh won't, Marion. . . . Hey, Art! Go tell Sam Hinkle he's goin' to lose his purty clerk on account of she's gettin' married. Find out if we can hold it in his hotel lobby. I—"

Jerry Bayer clapped a hand over the man's ample mouth. "Tom," he begged, "you've got this all wrong. Wait a minute, won't you?"

Looking hurt, Farley removed the hand. "What's that?" He stared from the youth to the girl. "Yuh busted up already? But Marion told me she'd sold yore spread for yuh, and I should get ready to splice yuh two, and yuh'd leave on yore honeymoon tonight, and—"

"So that was the scheme!" Jack Wallace interposed harshly. "Look here, are yuh the justice of the peace? Then give me a warrant for this girl's arrest. She sold me an option on a ranch she didn't own. That's takin' money under false pretenses. Criminal, ain't it?"

Bayer seized Farley's flabby arm and hurried him inside the jail office. Marion and Wallace followed after. The girl noticed bald Sam Hinkle, her employer in the Commercial Hotel, trotting across the street, and ten or twelve other individuals, each wearing a broad, knowing grin, hurrying near. Farley's summons had caused word to pass from mouth to mouth, and with the irrepressible curiosity of humankind, Alleposa citizens gathered from stores and saloons that lined the single thoroughfare of the prairie town.

"Tom, please tell people they can't come in!" Marion begged worriedly. "And—and close the door. Oh, it's all a mistake, don't you see? There isn't going to be any wedding!"

The two-hundred-pound justice of the peace stared at her for an instant. Then Farley lurched his great frame to the door. "There ain't goin' to be no weddin', folks," he boomed out. "Reckon Marion and Jerry had a scrap." He slammed the door.

Turning again, Farley regarded them puzzledly. "H'm," Tom muttered, and waddled to a chair. "Now what's this talk about a warrant?"

Jack Wallace immediately voiced his complaint. Deputy Bayer explained as best he could that of course Marion had intended no harm, but in her eagerness to do him a favor and to do Wallace one, had overstepped the letter of the law. Farley scowled as he matched his big thumbs and nodded.

"I want her jailed!" sharply insisted Jack Wallace.

Marion sat, white-faced, watching with apprehension that would not be stilled. At length the justice of the peace leaned to pat her small hand. "Sorry, Marion, but it looks like I got to issue that there warrant. Can't help myself."

Tom Farley looked at her an instant with sympathy and regret in his honest blue eyes; then he waddled to the desk that stood against one wall and silently made out a paper. He accepted a fee from Wallace and handed the warrant to Jerry Bayer. The formality of her arrest was accomplished.

Gray spots swam before the girl's eyes. She was actually a prisoner of the law, arrested by the man she expected to marry! She sighed and, clenching her small fists, stared dully at the floor.

"Now Tom," Jerry said in a low, grim tone, "how about bail? I'll supply cash to any amount you name that's in reason."

"Good idea! I'll fix bail at a hundred bucks. No— Hold on!" he snapped at Jack Wallace who started at once to protest. "That maybe ain't much money, but man, there's no chance of this gal tryin' to beat town —not the slightest. That's the court order," Tom stated firmly. "Them as don't like it can get out."

Wallace grumbled something under his breath. "Look here," Jerry offered placatingly, "why not let me return your hundred dollars? It won't do you any good to prosecute this girl."

The man stopped near the door. Again the shrewd light played in his eyes and the lean fingers of one hand rubbed his purplish chin reflectively. "Nope, won't take it," Wallace finally stated.

He started to open the door, but paused and said, "Well—I tell yuh, Bayer, I want that land an' stock. Aim to pick up two or three small ranches an' make a big cattle development here. If I lose yore spread my whole scheme's knocked into a busted strawberry box. Yuh can't blame me for bein' mad, can yuh?" he asked in a whining tone.

"But I'm willin' to give yuh a chance to patch this thing up, on one condition. Get yore spread back from that feller Stevens yuh sold it to this mornin'. Go to him, tell him about this here trouble. Maybe offer him extra money to sell it back to yuh. Then come to me and we'll make a deal. If I get the ranch I won't have no charge left against this gal."

Bayer looked from Marion to Wallace, then to Tom Farley, listening with interest. He swallowed hard. "I'll do it—I'll manage it somehow if I possibly can!"

There was a babble of voices from the crowd outside the jail, who were waiting impatiently for Marion and Jerry to emerge. Tom Farley saw the troubled expressions on their faces and made a gestured suggestion. "Go out the back way. Them gossips'd pick yuh to pieces like a buzzard picks a chicken.

"I won't say anythin' about the warrant. I'll just make out yuh aim to be married later on, and I'm to do the job. But I reckon the secret's out now," he added ruefully as he peered through the open door, then quickly closed it again. "That feller Wallace is a-tellin' all he knows right this minute!"

They hurried out the rear entrance to the jail, leaving Farley to repair the damage as best he could. Jerry Bayer

went with Marion a roundabout way to the back door of the Commercial Hotel where he stopped.

"You go to your room and wait. I'll ride out to Heck Stevens' place and do my best to buy back the Triple B. Then we'll sell it to Wallace and we'll still be rid of the place and money ahead."

He turned to go, but she clutched his arm. "Jerry! You never got along with Heck and he doesn't like you. He'll surely demand more money for the place than he paid. Where are you going to get that extra cash?"

His face darkened as he realized the truth of this. Heck Stevens was a hard-dealing, penurious rancher. He would demand a premium; there was not the slightest doubt of it. Jerry shifted weight. "Well—uh, Tom Farley's going to loan me five hundred. He whispered that he would.

"I'll manage somehow," he ended determinedly. "I've got to. You stay in your room, Marion, so folks can't ask you all kinds of embarrassing questions, and I'll be back in an hour or so. Gosh, this has got to turn out right. It's got to!"

He was gone along the passageway from the alley to the main street. Pale with apprehension, Marion entered the hotel. As she passed out of the kitchen into the lobby, Sam Hinkle, the plump, fussy proprietor, came in the front door. He carried in one hand a small bundle of mail which evidently he had just obtained at the post office in the Acme General Store.

"Well, well, Marion, this *is* too bad!" the little man panted sympathetically. "But I know you don't want to talk about it, so—tchk! here, I've some mail for you." He sorted it quickly. "Nope, it's for young Bayer. You want to take it?"

"Thank you, Mr. Hinkle. I'll give it to Jerry when he comes back."

Slipping the letter into the pocket of her dress, Marion hurried up the rubber-treaded stairway as three men entered the hotel from the main street. She wanted to hide herself, to avoid meeting anyone until this awful thing had been straightened out, until she was released from the custody of the bail bond.

Shame and contrition flooded over her as she reached her own small room on the third floor and, with a choking sob, flung herself on the bed. How could she have done such a thing as to sign that option? Why, she should have known better. It was fraud, it was plain stealing!

But of course her motive had been honest; it was indeed a queer quirk of fate that after a year and a half of trying, Jerry Bayer was suddenly able to sell the Triple B Ranch to either of two buyers. And as luck would have it, he had sold to Heck Stevens before Marion could apprise him of Jack Wallace's offer.

An hour dragged slowly past. Gradually the nineteen-year-old girl had calmed, but the heaviness of dread remained in her heart and as she clenched and unclenched her slender fingers spasmodically, she pondered what would be Heck Stevens' decision. The man was crotchety of temper and had few friends.

Something deep in her being kept the girl fearful. Suppose Heck refused to sell the Triple B at any price? Jack Wallace was a hard man and determinedly vengeful. It would mean that she, Marion Poole, would be sent to the penitentiary!

It was dark outside. Rising, the girl began to pace her room, but of a sudden she stopped. Her small fists clenched at her sides and a look of decision came to her face. Remembrance of her pinto pony still tied at the hitch-rail before the jail had flashed a suggestion. It was hard to wait here inactive; it was nerve-wracking. Yes, she would do it!

She would ride out toward Heck Stevens' ranch to meet Jerry, so as to learn at the earliest possible moment the outcome of his errand. Marion began to change her gingham dress for riding trousers and boots.

Quickly she donned a pongee blouse and knotted a scarf about her throat. As she was reaching into the closet for a leather jacket, the sound of heavy steps in the hall made her pause, listening.

Someone lurched heavily against her door. Marion stood taut a fraction of a second, but the swift flash of fear was gone as quickly as it came. The instinct of long training in matter-of-fact Western ways made her step lithely to the door and turn the knob.

The crouched form of a man toppled through the opening to sprawl full length on the floor.

The girl uttered a frightened cry. But almost before it had left her lips she recognized in the rays of the oil lamp on the nearby table—Jerry Bayer.

She stared at him with apprehension welling so hotly in her breast that she could not breathe nor utter a word. Then, gasping, she dropped on her knees at his side. Her fingers touched his tousled sandy hair and she drew back horrified. They were sticky with red blood.

Marion sprang to the washstand, where she poured clear, cold water into the bowl. Bringing it back, she daubed a towel into the liquid and applied it to the wound. It was a short scalp groove and bore an ugly look. But with her lips pressed to fight off the nausea that assailed her, Marion bathed the hurt man's forehead and face.

"Jerry! Jerry!" she called in a tone of anxiety. "Jerry, speak to me!"

His eyes fluttered and at last remained open as he stared dazedly. After a moment he came to realization of his whereabouts. "They—they held me up!" he gasped in a hoarse voice. "The money. . . ."

Marion kept one end of the towel pressed to his wound while she bent low. "Who held you up, Jerry? What happened?"

He waited for strength to ebb back. "I was riding out near the creek, Clear Creek—you know, three miles from town. Two masked hombres held me up. I fought, but they plugged me. I must have been out quite awhile. They got the cash, fifty-five hundred dollars, my money and Tom Farley's. But I—I think I wounded one of 'em!" he panted hopefully.

Marion straightened. "Jerry, hold that towel to your head. I'm going for Doc Preston. I'll be right back!" She ran to the door and stepped into the hotel corridor.

But as she hurried toward the stairway, heavy voices floated to her ears from a nearby room. It occurred to the anxious girl to send whoever was there for the Alleposa practitioner, so that she would not be forced to leave Bayer alone until Dr. Preston arrived.

Marion retraced her steps. But as she neared the door through which the voices floated, it closed with a bang, as though someone had kicked it shut.

The girl debated swiftly. She was about to start again for the stairway when an electric thrill shot through her whole being, causing her to stand tense, scarcely breathing.

". . . take my split and get out. I'll send the doc to see yuh, Heck, and yo're gonna be all right. But I got to leave quick!"

The doorknob turned. Marion shrank back against the corridor wall. But the trembling, panicky voice of Heck Stevens made the stranger inside hesitate. "Ben, you can't go off an' leave me! For God's sake, call Doc Preston. Oh!" Stevens moaned. "Look, I'm bleedin' to death. I'm—"

His words were drowned in a harsh snarl and there came to the girl's ears the sound of a palm smacking over Heck's mouth. Marion, her face pale, her pulse drumming loudly in her ears, seized the doorknob and shoved inward.

She halted with one foot on the threshhold, the other in the corridor. Her brown eyes widened and her red,

curving lips glistened moistly in the lamplight as she stared first at the blood-smeared man on the bed, then at the startled figure of Jack Wallace.

He was first to regain his wits. His right hand swished the skirt of his coat back and the bluish forty-five seemed to leap into his fist like a live thing. With a little cry Marion charged.

Although he was sixty pounds heavier, the force of her bold onslaught hurled him back against the dresser. She fought to grasp the barrel of his gun and suddenly felt it between her fingers. In desperation she clung, burrowing her face against the lapels of Wallace's corduroy coat to avoid the succession of vicious blows from his hard left fist.

Of a sudden the man wrenched free. His weapon exploded with a terrific crashing sound that made the entire room reel before the girl's eyes and brought acrid fumes of burned powder to her nostrils. A hot sensation sprang from her upper arm, the bullet's impact causing her to sprawl over the legs of Heck Stevens on the bed.

The door shot inward. "Drop that gun!"

Wallace tried to bring his weapon to bear on the new aggressor. And it did explode again, but harmlessly, as a square fist took the ranch buyer under his sharply pointed chin. He lifted on his heels, swayed back and toppled heavily to the floor.

"HERE, Marion—swallow this." The whiskey stung her senses to new life. Dizziness receded and she sat up in startled bewilderment. Why, she was in her own room again, in her own bed, and there was no sign whatever of Jack Wallace and Heck Stevens.

"Jerry! Where are they?"

"This Jack Wallace is the Bensinger that's been managin' the Bar 30 Ranch in Wyoming. Savvy? Accordin' to Uncle Bert's letter—which Hinkle gave you and you dropped on the floor here—he caught Bensinger stealin' payroll money and aimed to have him pinched, but he got away.

"Knowing I wanted to sell out, he came here and slickered you into giving him that option on my Triple B. Then he schemed with Stevens for Heck to buy my ranch. Bensinger, alias Jack Wallace, then demanded the place by the terms of his option. That forced me to try to buy back from Stevens, since I had to get you out of this money-on-false-pretenses trouble. Do you see?"

He stopped for breath and, reaching over, took both her small hands in his large, bronzed ones. "Stevens and Wallace held me up. Each was to get half the loot. That would be like a rebate and would make the cost of my place to Stevens only twenty-five hundred instead of five thousand dollars. And Wallace, or Bensinger, was twenty-five hundred and some revenge to the good.

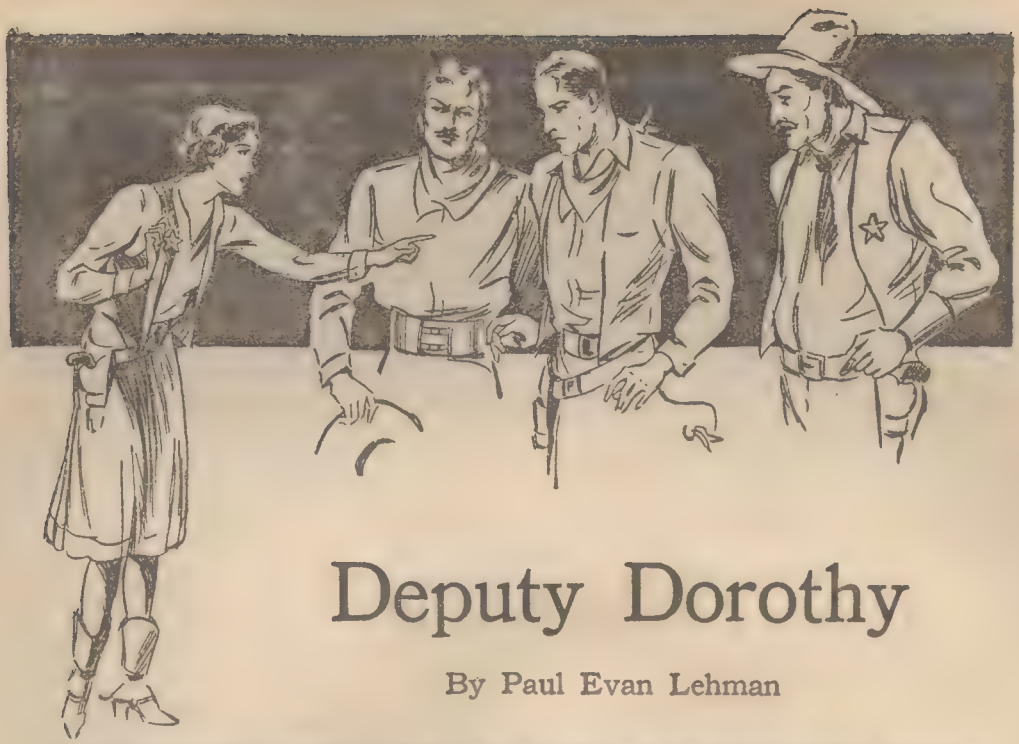
"Add the five hundred I borrowed from Tom Farley, and it was a slick deal all around. But it went wrong when I wounded Stevens. Bensinger brought Heck to his room for Doc Preston to see, as he was afraid Heck might die. But he won't.

"Shucks!" Bayer made a gesture as if to dismiss the whole subject; then his eyes encountered the letter again. He grinned. "Tom Farley and Sam Hinkle and Abe Turner are waitin' in the hall. Shall I let 'em in?"

Her silken brows gathered puzzledly. "What for, Jerry?"

"Why, Uncle Bert's letter says he wants me to take over his spread right away. Which means we've got to get married and leave on Number 8 at midnight. You know, Marion, I've had a sort of option on you for a year and a half. Sure hope you don't go back on it, 'cause I'm anxious to—"

"Take over the property? Oh, Jerry," she breathed, her eyes shining, her red lips tantalizingly close to his, "don't delay! Your option is better than mine was; yours will work!"



# Deputy Dorothy

By Paul Evan Lehman

**In the dead of night Deputy Dorothy set out upon her sleuthing activities, confident that she could bring a criminal to justice. But Dorothy's blue eyes were never meant for tracking bandits, and she willingly surrendered both her star and her heart to someone who would guard and cherish them.**

## I

IT was past midnight when the engine of the Limited pulled up opposite the water tank. Behind the panting monster of iron and steel and brass stretched a line of coaches, their darkened windows indicative of tranquilly sleeping passengers. The only visible light was that which seeped through the ventilators of the express car; that is, of course, excepting the headlight that flooded the tracks before the halted train, and the lantern of the flagman which bobbed fitfully behind it.

The fireman, standing high on the tender, swung the water hose over the trap in the tank and yanked the lever. Down in the cab, the engineer relaxed on his cushioned seat and tamped fresh tobacco into his pipe bowl.

In the diffused moonlight of an overcast sky a lithe figure mounted silently to the platform of the engine and crouched against the front of the tender so as to remain invisible to the fireman above. The man was dressed in dark clothing, and a mask of some dark material covered that part of his face below the glinting eyes. In his hand he held a blue-barreled Colt.

The engineer drew a match from his overalls pocket and leaned over to scratch it on the grating. In the act of applying the flame to the tobacco he glanced up, and the match fluttered from his fingers.

The bandit rose swiftly and flung a hasty glance toward the fireman who was standing with his back to the cab, busy with the stream of water. Making a menacing motion with the gun, the bandit took two swift strides forward, and in the next second had snapped one steel loop of a pair of handcuffs on the left wrist of the engineer. The other he fastened about a steam pipe. The weapon threatened again, enjoining continued silence; then the masked

man melted into the shadows behind the boiler on the left side of the cab.

The fireman cut off the flow, swung the hose away from the train, closed the trap, and scrambled down over the coal.

"All right, Tom," he called to his mate. Then he caught sight of the steel band about the engineer's wrist, and snapped erect. A figure materialized from the gloom behind him, and the blued-steel barrel of the Colt came down upon his skull with a dull thud. The fireman slumped to the deck like a sack of wet bran.

"You damn dirty coward!" blazed the engineer, and lunged at the bandit.

The handcuffs brought him up and threw him off balance. When he had recovered it was to find the muzzle of the Colt boring into his back.

"You keep your yap shut and do as I say. Whistle in your flag. I'm goin' to uncouple behind the express car. If you try any funny business, you won't live to brag about it."

The bandit dropped to the ground and ran silently to the rear of the express car. He heard the four blasts of the whistle and caught the bob of the lantern to the rear as the flagman started for the end of the train. Quickly the masked man separated the air hose and uncoupled. Before the trainman had reached the rear coach, he was climbing the steps to the engine cab.

"Get goin'," he ordered briefly. The engineer glared at him from his seat in the cab. The bandit cocked his revolver, and the double click sounded very ominous. "I said get goin'," he repeated grimly.

Reluctantly the engineer released the air and tugged at the throttle. Engine, tender, and express car moved slowly ahead.

Five miles farther on the bandit nodded curtly to the engineer.

"All right; stop her," he ordered. Then as the lightened train came to a halt: "You know the messenger?"

"No," answered the engineer slowly.

"You're a liar," said the bandit calmly, and, producing a key, unlocked the cuff about the engineer's wrist. "Get down ahead o' me. You're goin' to hammer on the door o' the express car and tell the messenger to open up. Tell him you need his help or somethin'. He'll know your voice."

"You can go to hell!" spat the engineer.

"You're wrong, buddy. It's you that'll be lookin' that place over if you don't do exactly as I say. Now git down."

Keeping the man covered, the bandit followed him to the ground and urged him to the express car. The engineer walked directly to the door and thumped on it with his fists.

"Hey, Terry!" he called. "Come out —and come out a-shootin'!"

From behind him came a savage oath, and again the barrel of the Colt rose and fell. The engineer staggered forward against the car and would have slumped to the ground, but the bandit, throwing both arms about him, held him by main force upon his feet. Using the trainman's body as a shield for his own, the bandit trained his weapon on the door of the express car and waited.

The door slid open and the messenger, sawed-off shotgun in hand, peered out into the darkness. The light from the car revealed to him the sagging form of the engineer, but the figure behind was invisible to him.

"Tom! What's the matter?" exclaimed the messenger.

The bandit answered. "Stick 'em up, buddy!"

The messenger dropped his gun and slowly raised his hands. His attention caught and held by the limp trainman, he had just noticed that threatening Colt. The bandit released his hold on the engineer, and the unconscious man dropped inertly to the ground.

After that it was easy. The safe

was expertly blown, and within fifteen minutes from the time the door had been opened by the messenger the lone bandit was riding toward the hills. Strapped to the cantle behind him was a gunny sack containing some fifteen thousand dollars.

The bandit sneered in the darkness. "Mighty soft," he murmured to himself. "And they told me it took at least three men to handle a job like that. Just goes to show that one man with brain is worth three with brawn. Now for the rest of the program."

## II

DOROTHY HOLMES raised her head with the sudden alert movement of a startled deer and sat listening. The thing that had jarred her away from contemplation of her image in the limpid waters of the pool was a pistol shot, and the girl judged that the sound came from a point not more than two hundred yards from where she sat.

Dorothy was range-born and bred; the sound of gunfire was not by any means new to her. She herself usually carried a thirty-eight and knew how to handle it, as the shades of many diamond-back rattlers might have testified. She was not alarmed, then, by the shot which echoed and re-echoed against the hills, but she was a bit puzzled. Her father was not grazing any stock at this end of his range, and there was no reason that she could think of for any of the JH riders being up here. If the shot had come from the direction of the trail . . . but it hadn't.

A moment later her wonder increased. Two more shots sounded—not so distinctly this time—and Dorothy's practised ear immediately told her that the flat reports were made by a rifle.

She got up from the rock where she had been sitting; then, thinking better of it, sat down again. Here along the tree-bordered creek she was hidden from the view of any chance rider, and her pinto was tied in a clump of alders where he would not readily be seen. Hard characters occasionally rode through the country, and while Dorothy felt perfectly safe in a land where respect for women was a rule almost without exception, there was certainly no reason for her inviting trouble, especially when it might arrive on leaden wings.

Five minutes passed and the girl's curiosity had about persuaded her to investigate the source of the shots, when her attention was caught by a faint splash some distance down the creek.

A man was riding along the bed of the stream, allowing his mount to pick its way among the rocks that offered at best a most uncertain footing. From time to time this man would gaze anxiously over his shoulder as though momentarily expecting to sight a pursuer.

Things were quite plain to Dorothy now. She knew the signs. This would be another law-breaker on the dodge who had heard of her father, Jud Holmes, and the sanctuary he offered fugitives from justice. No doubt this man was trying to make his way to the JH now, the sheriff hard on his heels.

At times Dorothy lost patience with her parent and his tolerance of law-breakers. It seemed to her that every man on the spread had been at one time a fugitive from justice. They were all good workers, Dorothy was forced to admit, and a few of them were really likable boys; but some day. . . .

She stirred impatiently, and at her movement the man, who had approached quite close by this time, twisted his body to face her. In that swift movement Dorothy recognized the lithe grace and lean suppleness of a panther; the eyes that instantly focused themselves upon her were narrowed and keen; the hand which had instinctively swung the heavy

blue-barreled Colt to cover her was tense.

For a space of ten heartbeats the two sat gazing at each other; then the man uttered what sounded like a snort of disgust, and shoved his six-gun back into its holster.

"Yes, I'm just a girl," said Dorothy sharply.

She hadn't liked that snort. Dorothy was very pretty, and pampered, and proud; young men—and for that matter, old men, too—were wont to gaze upon her for the first time with rounded eyes and a little intake of breath expressive of deep and abiding admiration. They certainly did not snort.

The young man gave her a cold, impersonal stare, then turned his head and scanned the other bank of the creek. His gaze settled on a gully that ran off at right angles to the stream. The bed of this gully was rocky and hard. He urged his bay horse toward its mouth and helped the animal pick a careful course over the smooth stone. Presently he rounded a bend in the wash and was lost to Dorothy's sight. But before he disappeared the girl had noticed that a bulky sack was tied to the cantle of his saddle.

For some minutes Dorothy sat there staring after him. She felt slightly resentful. He had not even spoken to her. Probably he was one of these disdainful fellows, she thought; the kind that, because they are a bit good-looking, assume a superior air and gaze down at one along a nicely shaped nose. Well, if he showed up at the JH, she'd certainly teach him a lesson.

Behind her the bushes rustled, and Dorothy turned her head to gaze wide-eyed into the yawning muzzle of a forty-five Colt.

"Stick 'em up, fella!" came the startling command.

Before she could even think of obeying, the weapon was hurriedly yanked away and a man thrust himself through the thick brush, words of apology tumbling from his lips.

"Holy heck! It's Miss Dorothy, Andy. Now whadda you think o' that? . . . Miss Dorothy, 'scuse me all to pieces, ma'am!"

"Bill Tripp, what in the world are you up to?" demanded Dorothy. "Mr. Anderson, is your deputy crazy, that he goes about poking guns into people's faces?"

Sheriff Anderson came crashing through the bushes. He laughed a bit uncertainly. "Why, now, Dorothy, you cain't hardly blame Bill. We been chasin' a gent over the country a bit, and picked up a set o' hawss tracks down by the ford. Bill, he follows 'em and finds you in here. I reckon he throwed down on you thinkin' you was the jigger we was huntin'."

"Yes'm, that's it," said the deputy, grinning sheepishly. "Andy done got her figgered out plumb correct. Miss Dorothy, you ain't seen a jigger on a bay cow-hawss with a black hat and a blue silk shirt, have you?"

"A bay cow-horse with a black hat and a blue silk shirt?" repeated Dorothy in apparent puzzlement. "Bill Tripp, you must be crazy!"

"O' course she ain't seen him," said the sheriff. "We'd better mosey along, Bill. Get your hawss and we'll try another set o' tracks. Sorry to have bothered you, Dorothy."

They moved away, and a minute later Dorothy heard them mount and start back toward the ford.

She smiled a bit to herself and gazed across the creek toward the mouth of the gully. She should have told the sheriff what she knew, perhaps; but the chances were that the fellow would try to get a job with her father, and if the enormity of his crime demanded it, she could turn him over later. One thing was certain: the law could wait until she had given him his lesson. Young men—handsome young men—who looked at a pretty girl and snorted like a horse simply had to be taught a lesson.

She got up presently and went after her pinto. Off to her right she could see Sheriff Anderson and his deputy, Bill Tripp, riding southeast at a high lope.

Dorothy mounted, and, finding a place where she could descend the creek bank, forced the animal into the shallow water. At the mouth of the gully she permitted the animal to pick his way over the rocks until she reached the bend around which the fugitive had disappeared. Here she dismounted and called cautiously:

"Don't shoot! It's me."

Leading the horse, she stepped a bit fearfully around the jutting rock wall. Men on the dodge, she knew, were prone to shoot first and ask questions afterwards. No doubt he had heard the voices of the officers, followed by the clink of her horse's shoes on stone. She could easily picture him backed into a corner snarling over his leveled gun.

She actually saw nothing of the sort. The fugitive was sprawled upon the rocky floor, back propped comfortably against a boulder, lazily smoking a cigarette. To add to her surprise he was grinning at her, a bit sardonically, Dorothy thought.

"What are you doing loafing around here?" she demanded a bit sharply. "I should think you'd be making tracks away from this section of the country."

He waved his hand lazily. "Gully petered out in a blind pocket," he explained carelessly. "A hawss with claws might climb them walls, but the one I'm forkin' happens to be equipped with hoofs. You're Miss Holmes, ain't you?"

Dorothy lifted her chin. "I am."

"Dad owns the JH," continued the cowboy musingly. "I was aimin' to hit him for a job."

"We don't need any more hands," said Dorothy tartly. "But I suppose if you give him some hard-luck story you can persuade him to sign you on." Her red lips curved a bit scornfully. "What is your offense—murder, or just plain horse stealing?"

He grinned up at her. "Shucks, you wrong me, lady. I don't mess with such petty misdemeanors. All I did was to hang my grandmother up by the thumbs and beat her to death with a blacksnake whip."

"I don't think you're a bit funny," said Dorothy. "Instead, I think you are rather—contemptible."

"Well, you're shore entitled to your opinion," he answered indifferently. "Just what direction do I ride to reach the JH?"

"Southeast," answered Dorothy vindictively, nodding in the direction taken by Sheriff Anderson and his deputy. This man was impossible. After all, the law should be allowed to deal with him.

"Much obliged," he said gravely.

He got to his feet and swung lightly into the saddle. Without paying her any further attention, he rode down the gully toward the creek.

Dorothy mounted her pinto and followed, being careful to keep a hundred feet or so in the rear. This was going to be good, and she could not afford to miss it. If he followed her instructions he should ride into the arms of the sheriff. Thus Dorothy would be accomplishing his downfall just as surely as though she had directed the officers to his hiding place. The thought brought a malicious smile to her lips.

The pinto crossed the creek and crowded through the brush that fringed it. In the open Dorothy drew rein. The fugitive had halted his horse at the trail which ran southeast to the town of Calder, and northwest to the JH ranch buildings. Now he turned and looked at the girl questioningly. Dorothy hesitated a moment, then her lips tightened and she pointed southeast toward Calder—and the sheriff. The young man nodded his understanding, and deliberately turned his horse northwest!

Even as Dorothy gave voice to an

exclamation of surprise, he raised his arm in a gesture of ironic thanks.

"The beast!" said Dorothy hotly. "I hate him! Now how in thunder did he know that I lied to him?"

## III

DOROTHY HOLMES sat her pinto and gazed after the rapidly traveling horseman. Angry as she undoubtedly was, her range-trained eyes subconsciously noted the grace with which the man sat his bay cow-horse, the lithe, slim form of him as he slouched slightly in the saddle, the jaunty angle of the black Stetson, the shimmering softness of the blue silk shirt. Then she remembered his indifference toward her, and she frowned resentfully.

The horseman was following the most direct route to the JH, otherwise Dorothy would have contrived to reach the ranch and the ear of her father before him. This being out of the question, her only alternative was to arrive at the ranch so far behind him as to give the impression that she was not even slightly interested in his business. Dorothy therefore loped the pinto due north, swinging gradually to the west so as to come to the JH buildings from an entirely different direction.

It was noon by the time she rode into the yard, and the JH punchers were lounging about the bunkhouse awaiting the dinner gong. She glanced into the little horse corral as she dismounted, and easily located a bay cow-horse with a back that was still damp from the saddle blanket.

Her father's foreman slouched up and touched a forefinger to his Stetson brim.

"I'll take care o' the pinto," he growled.

Dorothy nodded and walked toward the house. She didn't like Tug Gleason, although he had been working for her father a long while. He was habitually surly, not as clean as he might have been, and far from handsome. She could remember how he, too, had arrived at the JH on a sweated horse and with a hunted light in his fierce black eyes.

She had heard it rumored that he had shot a man over in Piñon County. Of course, her father had assured her that he believed the killing to have been the result of a frame-up; but then Jud Holmes was forever finding excuses for the wild men who rode for him.

Dorothy stopped with one booted foot on the veranda steps. The fugitive was just coming out of the house, and at sight of him Dorothy gasped; for the black Stetson had been replaced by one of pearl-gray, and the shirt he was wearing now was of vivid pink instead of ultramarine.

The young man stopped at the top of the steps, gazed down upon her for a brief second, then started rolling a cigarette exactly as though he had not seen her at all.

"Well," snapped Dorothy, "I suppose you got the job."

He nodded carelessly and spoke without raising his eyes. "Shore—top-hand, at forty a month. Name's on the books as Bob Shannon."

"A good name," said Dorothy scathingly. "Too bad it isn't your own."

Bob Shannon licked his cigarette thoughtfully.

"You speakin' from first-hand knowledge, or just guessin'?" he asked.

"I don't have to guess. I never saw one of your stripe yet who didn't sooner or later adopt a name that wasn't his."

"That's a man's privilege if he wants to exercise it," replied Shannon coolly. "What a man calls himself is his own particular business."

"Of course; also the clothes he wears. What became of the black Stetson and the blue silk shirt?"

He eyed her gravely. "The ones the bay cow-hawss was wearin'?"

Dorothy felt the hot blood mount to her cheeks. He must have heard Bill Tripp's senseless question and her answer to it—must know that she had deliberately avoided a direct reply. The girl was furious; and to add to her ire she thought she could see Shannon's eyes glinting in sardonic amusement.

"It's a good thing for you that I dodged that question," she snapped.

"Mebbe so," he acknowledged. "But it's not so good for you. If I did happen to be wanted by the law, right now you stand guilty of helpin' me escape. . . . Well, there goes the dinner gong. Sorry to leave, but the spuds are callin'."

Before she could answer, he had dropped to the ground and was striding toward the mess shack.

Dorothy watched him in speechless rage. Not only was he ill-mannered, but he was also without the slightest sense of gratitude. The idea of implying that she was his accomplice! She turned back toward the house in time to see her father come out on the porch, thus unwittingly inviting upon his own head the storm of wrath that Bob Shannon had so skilfully dodged.

She ran up the steps and shook her sire by the arm.

"Dad, I'm ashamed of you! Why in the world did you hire that abominable Shannon man? He's on the dodge as sure as I'm a foot high."

Jud Holmes' eyes twinkled a bit as he looked into her stormy face.

"Now, Dot, you needn't get so het up about it. Seems to me that he's a mighty nice boy."

"Nice boy, rats!" said Dorothy wrathfully. "He has the breeding of a burro and the delicate ways of a stray range bull."

"Not to mention the face o' one o' them Greek gods and the grace of a prairie mustang," added her sire dryly. "Don't take it so hard, daughter. Mebbe he ain't been trained to please the ladies like Freddy Rellek has. Just because he didn't lose his hat and get his feet all tangled up when he first seen you is no reason for hatin' him."

"It isn't that! He—"

"Shore, shore; I know," said Jud hurriedly. "Now you run along. I gotta tell Tug what to do with them yearlin's. Dinner's just about ready, and I'll be back pronto. By the time you've tucked some o' Teresa's biscuits under your belt you'll feel better about it. I'm bankin' that when you get to know Shannon you'll find him a right nice-mannered boy."

He put her gently from him and went striding down the steps and over to the mess shack; and once more Dorothy was forced to stamp her foot in futile rage.

"Oh, heck!" she exclaimed viciously, and went into the house. Here she attempted to vent her spleen on fat Teresa, the Mexican housewoman; but Teresa's knowledge of English was extremely limited, and she had a silly habit of standing grinning toothlessly while one berated her—a habit that was extremely annoying to the one doing the berating. As a consequence, Dorothy, dinner temporarily forgotten, left the house in disgust in time to see three men ride up and dismount near the mess shack.

Her interest in things picked up at once. Two of the arrivals were Sheriff Anderson and his deputy, and the third was Fred Rellek, the Easterner who for the past two weeks had amused them by his quaint ways and charmed them with his excellent manners.

Her father had met Rellek in Calder, where the Easterner was staying at the hotel, and, having spent a pleasant evening with him, had invited him to make his headquarters at the JH. Rellek confided to them that, having inherited a bit of money back home, he was hopefully scouring the country with the object of acquiring a bit of grazing land and a few head of stock for himself.

He was cheerful, courteous, and apparently eager to learn the cattle business; therefore one was inclined to overlook the fact that he rode with his stirrups much too short, and dressed in range clothing that was much too ornate to be useful.

Dorothy saw the three men go into the mess shack, and walked over after them. Something was in the air, and she had a hunch that the something concerned a certain young man who was now wearing a pearl-gray hat and a shirt of vivid pink.

She found the doorway blocked by the burly form of the deputy, Bill Tripp, and discovered that she could remain unobserved and at the same time obtain a good view of the interior by peering beneath Bill's arm.

Rellek had preceded the others into the room, and was addressing her father, who had been talking with Tug Gleason.

"I just brought in a couple of wanderers," Rellek was saying. "This is the sheriff, Mr. Anderson, and his deputy, Mr. Tripp. . . . Gentlemen, Mr. Jud Holmes."

Rellek went through with his introduction gravely, to the amusement of the JH punchers. The three men who were thus formally made acquainted with each other had been friends for years.

"Howdeedo, Sheriff Anderson," said Jud Holmes politely.

"Pleased to meetcha, Mr. Holmes," responded the sheriff, grinning.

"Charmed, I'm shore," said Bill Tripp, and snickered.

Rellek went on, "I met these gentlemen while riding in from the Lazy 8. Mr. Anderson tells me a really remarkable story. It seems that a lone bandit held up and robbed the Limited last night. Made his escape with fifty thousand dollars."

"Fifteen thousand," corrected Anderson. "That's right, Jud. Knocked out the engineer and fireman and blew the safe. Bandit was dressed in dark clothes and had a black mask over his face. Couldn't get a description of him except that he's tall and slim."

"I see," said Jud Holmes, frowning. "Found any traces, Andy?"

"No," replied the sheriff. "Trail was covered up as pretty as you please; but we did sight a suspicious-lookin' stranger headed this way, and lit out after him. Lost him along the crick somewheres. Thought you might of seen him. He was forkin' a dark bay and wearin' a blue silk shirt and black Stetson."

"No, I haven't," answered Holmes thoughtfully. "Bay hawsses are common enough and so are black hats and blue shirts; but it just happens that I haven't seen that combination lately. I reckon you're on the wrong trail, Andy."

"Well," said the sheriff, "you know how it is, Jud. That man is apt to stumble out your way, knowin'—well, you understand, I reckon."

"Yes, I know what you mean. If this jigger with the blue shirt and black hat was to come to me for help, you're figgerin' that I'd probably take him in until I knowed for certain that he was the hold-up gent."

"That's about it," answered the sheriff. "Your method is what you might call unorthodox, but there's no denyin' that you've turned some good men outa mighty pore material. Well, I reckon we'll be amblin' along."

"Better have a bite to eat first," suggested Holmes.

"Say, I reckon we will. Come to think of it, we ain't had no dinner."

Dorothy dodged away from the door as Bill Tripp moved toward the table. She had been watching the reaction of the punchers to the news of the hold-up as told by Rellek. All but two of them had shown their interest in the form of turned faces and eager expressions. And one of the men who had kept his eyes on the plate before him was Bob Shannon. The other was her father's foreman, Tug Gleason.

To Dorothy it seemed that her duty was plain. No one but she and Bob

Shannon himself knew that the man they were seeking was even now in their midst. She had about decided to lay her knowledge before the sheriff when Anderson's voice came to her through the doorway of the shack, and she knew at once that the time for disclosure had not yet arrived.

The sheriff had been telling the story in detail; now she heard him say:

"He didn't kill nobody, so I reckon the most important thing is to get that money back. Likely he's cached it somewhere."

Dorothy walked slowly to the horse corral and leaned thoughtfully against the rails. Decidedly it would not be the part of wisdom to expose Bob Shannon now. If he was guilty—and Dorothy had about concluded that he was—he would not be bullied into telling where he had hidden the loot. He would go to the penitentiary, serve his time and spend the money after he got out.

It was then that the inspiration seized Dorothy. The thought brought a flush of eagerness to her cheeks and the sparkle of anticipation to her eyes. Hold-up artists, she had heard, were unusually susceptible to feminine wiles. There had been many an outlaw whose destiny had been largely shaped by the slender hand of some woman.

It occurred to her that it might be a good idea to be real nice to Bob Shannon from now on. She would spend much of her time in his company; she would sympathize with him; and perhaps in the end she could win his confidence and worm from him the secret of the hiding place!

It was a marvelous plan—a plan which promised the slaying of not only two, but three birds with one stone. She could bring a criminal to justice, restore the stolen money and at the same time teach a certain conceited young man that while violent assault and victorious robbery were in themselves heinous offenses, they did not begin to compare in seriousness with snorting like a horse at sight of a girl who was pretty, pampered and proud.

The men were trooping from the mess shack and Bob Shannon chose that particular moment to step through the doorway. For a minute he stood talking with Tug Gleason; then the foreman nodded and walked away, leaving Bob to roll a cigarette.

The fugitive stood there with legs spread wide, thoughtfully tapping little flakes of tobacco into a thin paper. His gray Stetson was pushed far back, the sun glinting on his copper hair and bringing out into strong relief the virile lines of lean cheek and firm chin. Certainly Dorothy's task of being agreeable to this tall, clean-limbed young man would not be a difficult one.

Dorothy switched one boot with her riding crop, as was her habit when perturbed. Somehow the rôle of vamp did not appeal so much on second thought. It was too much like taking unfair advantage. She watched Bob light the cigarette, pinch out the match flame between thumb and forefinger, and inhale with the complete satisfaction of the healthy man who has just partaken of a good meal.

Dorothy wavered. It really was none of her business. He had killed no one and the express company was rich and powerful enough to do without the aid of a mere girl. And even as she debated the matter with herself, Shannon's sober eyes flashed in her direction, rested on the corral, swept along the rails until he appeared to be looking directly at her. He smiled and Dorothy, in spite of herself, smiled in return.

Then she heard a whicker behind her, and turning swiftly, saw the bay cow-horse with the damp patch on his back gazing with eager eyes toward his master. Dorothy stiffened, and the warmth went out of her face. So his smile had been not for her but for his horse!

It was the last straw. Dorothy waited until he had sauntered over to the bunkhouse—waited until her father came out and started for the dining room; then with set lips and flashing eyes she walked over to the mess shack and through the doorway.

Sheriff Anderson and his deputy were busy putting the finishing touch on the meal that the cook had set before them. They were alone in the room.

Dorothy dropped to the bench beside the sheriff.

"Sheriff Anderson," she said in a low, intense voice. "I want you to swear me in as a deputy sheriff."

Anderson strangled on a swallow of coffee, recovered and turned an amazed countenance toward the girl.

"A deputy?" he echoed. "Now what in time you aimin' to do, Dorothy?"

"A deputy," repeated the girl firmly. "There is no law against it, is there? You see, it occurred to me that if this train robber *should* stop at the JH, I might be able to learn from him where he has hidden the money. But I'd want to get the information in a legitimate way; not as though I were —well, betraying a confidence. I'd serve without pay, of course."

"A deputy, huh?" The sheriff was watching her shrewdly now, the surprised expression having given way to one of admiration. "Well, now, that ain't a bad idea; in fact, I'd say it amounted to inspiration. O' course, it's a bit irregular, as you might say, but—raise your right hand. Swear-to-uphold-constitution-United-States-this state-s'he'pyou-God?"

"I do," answered Dorothy firmly.

"Keno. You're a reg'lar appointed deputy." He fished in a pocket and produced a nickeled star. "Pin this on you where it won't show."

"Thank you. And of course you know—this is a secret between us."

"Shore," said the sheriff. Bill Tripp nodded solemnly.

Dorothy got up and hurried to the house. In the privacy of her own room she pinned the star inside the vest she wore over her blouse.

"I guess that will fix you, Mr. Bob Shannon," she whispered triumphantly.

Then, her appetite restored, she started for the dining room.

## IV

DOROTHY found her father and Fred Rellek waiting for her. They were discussing the robbery. Rellek's face was flushed and his eyes were sparkling with excitement. He appeared to be enjoying all the thrills of a young boy with his first paper-backed dime novel.

"Imagine it!" he said, after holding Dorothy's chair for her. "One man to hold up a whole train! Nervy, I call it!"

Jud Holmes grunted. "You mustn't forget, Freddy, that the hold-up gent had a gun to use against two unarmed men. Also, if the sheriff got the story straight, the bandit was standin' behind the engineer when the door was opened, so the messenger didn't have a chance to cut down on him. I'd say that bandit had more luck than nerve; it generally takes at least three men to do a job like that."

"Ah! That's just the point, Mr. Holmes. Knowing that, as this bandit probably did, I maintain that it took nerves of steel to go through with it single-handed. And do you know, I believe Mr. Anderson suspected me a bit at first? I didn't wonder at it at the time, but I remember now that he and his deputy approached me from different directions, and they were holding their rifles over their saddles in a most suggestive manner."

Jud Holmes chuckled. "Shouldn't wonder; you was ridin' from the south, and the hold-up occurred in that direction, although it was on the far side o' the Beartooths."

"Is that so? Well, I explained that I was just returning from the Lazy 8. I spent the night at that line cabin at the foot of the hills, as I usually

do when I make that trip, but even at that I suppose I was quite some distance from the railroad."

"About fifteen miles over the mountains," answered Jud tolerantly. "That ain't considered no distance out here. But o' course a rider like you could 'a' never made it. Let's see—fifteen miles from the Lazy 8 to the line cabin, about fifteen over the mountains to where the train was held up, fifteen back to the cabin again and then twenty to the JH. That's sixty-five miles. When did you leave the Lazy 8?"

"Shortly after noon."

Jud shook his head. "Less than a full day. Nope, that let's you out, Freddy. Ridin' like you do with short stirrups, it would take you a week to do that distance."

Rellek flushed a bit. "I seem to rest easier in the saddle that way," he explained mildly. "I've tried lengthening them, but it makes me terribly sore. By the way, I wonder why Sheriff Anderson examined the feet of my horse?"

Dorothy looked up quickly. Her father flashed her a keen glance, then went on to explain.

"Why, now that's a little secret that the sheriff don't want to get out, Freddy. Howsomever, I reckon I'd better tell you so's you won't say nothin' about that examination to nobody else. That train bandit left one clue—a calk on his horse's left hind shoe was broke. You two keep your eyes open, and if you find tracks showin' a broken calk on the left hind shoe, let me know."

"My goodness!" exclaimed Rellek. "There aren't any broken calks on my horse's shoes, are there?"

Jud Holmes laughed. "Nope. I just looked a few minutes ago. I shod that mare you're ridin' myself, and she's wearin' the same shoes I put on and they ain't a worn or broken calk on 'em. And now while I'm at it, I may as well tell you somethin' else. Anderson figgers that the gent who held up the train is an outlaw from Piñon County named Al Keller."

Dorothy was listening carefully; now she asked a question.

"Has he any reason for thinking that?"

"No real reason, I reckon. Just a hunch. It seems that Keller held up a stage and ripped open a mail bag. That put Uncle Sam on his trail, and I reckon Keller figgered it was time to change location. He always worked alone, and this train robbery was a one-man job."

"What sort of looking fellow is this Keller?" asked Fred Rellek.

"Andy don't rightly know. Hasn't been able to get a description except in a general way. He says he wrote to the sheriff o' Piñon County for a picture or a complete description, but likely he won't get it for a few days. In the meanwhile, this broken calk clue is about the best he has to work on."

"By the way he spoke," said Rellek, "he is of the opinion that the fellow will make for this ranch. What would be his object in doing that?"

Jud Holmes' face was very sober, and when he answered, his voice was grim.

"I'll tell you why, Freddy. My own brother was sent to the penitentiary for a killin' that he didn't do. The term was twenty years, and he'd served 'most two-thirds of it before we could prove him innocent and get a pardon. But his life was wrecked; he didn't live long to enjoy his freedom. Since then I've always had a warm spot in my heart for a fugitive.

"The law has made so many mistakes that I'll take a man in any day and give him a chance to prove his innocence to me. If he shapes up man-size, he stays as long as I can protect him; if he's just natchally bad, I give him his choice o' driftin' on or havin' me turn him over. Anderson knows that; that's why he spoke like he did."

"I see," said Rellek thoughtfully. "So if this mysterious gentleman with

the black hat and blue shirt should put in appearance, you'd conceal the fact from the sheriff until you were satisfied that he is actually guilty."

"And mebbe even then," replied Jud calmly. "There are cases when robbery is justified. I knew a man once whose brother was shot down while guardin' a money shipment. The stage company refused to do anything for his widow and children, so the man's brother started collectin' on his own account. He held up the stage and took five thousand dollars which he turned over to the widow. The stage company had to stand the loss. That man didn't call his act robbery and neither did I."

Rellek shook his head. "As Mr. Anderson remarked, your methods are a bit unorthodox; but on the whole, I believe you're right."

Dorothy was very thoughtful during the rest of the meal. The conversation shifted and the two men fell to talking over the proposition which the owner of the Lazy 8 had made Rellek. The girl left them after a while and went outside. She was wondering if by any chance this Bob Shannon could be the outlaw, Al Keller. A broken calk might tell the tale.

The JH punchers had gone about their afternoon tasks and the bay cow-horse was no longer in the corral. Dorothy studied the blur of tracks outside the enclosure, but it was as she had expected. So many animals had churned up the dust that the hoof-prints of none of them stood out clearly. It would be useless, she knew, to try to decipher the tracks inside the corral.

Dorothy felt the hard surface of the deputy's star on the inside of her vest and tightened her lips grimly. She was a legally appointed officer of the law; no effort should be spared in her attempt to bring the bandit to justice. She caught up the pinto and threw on her rig. Then she followed the trail which led to the place where she had first encountered Shannon.

Evidently Shannon had kept to the trail on his way to the JH, for again Dorothy's efforts to pick out the mark of a defective shoe were in vain. And at the place where the fugitive had ridden from creek to trail, she found grass knee-high, and except for the flattened stalks, no sign of his passage. Grimly she made her way across the stream and up the rocky gully. She might just as well have spared herself the pains. Hard, flinty ground and rough stone failed to yield any sign.

It was late afternoon when Dorothy returned to the ranch. As she drew up at the corral, she heard the clang of the anvil in the blacksmith shop. She left the pinto standing and walked rapidly over to the small outbuilding.

Tug Gleason was in the act of shaping a shoe to his horse's hoof.

He nodded surlily and seemed anxious to avoid meeting her gaze. Dorothy's eyes narrowed slightly. She had not forgotten that Gleason was one of the two who had appeared to have no interest in the sheriff's story of the hold-up.

"Shoeing him all around?" she asked casually.

He shot her a swift glance before he answered. "Yes'm. Threw a hind shoe this mawnin' and I figgered I'd do me a good job while I was at it."

Dorothy's voice was deceptively friendly. "You know, I bet I can tell you which hind shoe it was. I'll bet it was the left one."

Again came that swift, furtive glance; then Tug was working intently again. "You guessed it," he answered shortly.

Dorothy heard a movement behind her and turned quickly. Bob Shannon was watching her, and while his lips were sober enough, there was a hint of mocking laughter in his blue eyes. Some distance away his horse was standing over dragging reins.

"You interested in hawss shoes, ma'am?" he asked politely.

Dorothy was on the verge of mak-

ing some sharp retort, but remembered in time her decision to be friendly with this man. She smiled brightly.

"Why, a bit," she confessed. "You see, I depend on them for locomotion eight hours out of every twenty-four. That's a good-looking horse you have."

She strolled toward the animal in casual interest, and knew as she laid a soft hand on the bay's neck that Shannon had followed her. She ran her fingers along the animal's sleek flank and down one powerful leg. Below the hoof she could see the shiny blue-black rim of the shoe.

A drawling voice came from behind her: "Yes'm; he's been fresh shod all around. I'll bet you cain't guess what shoe *he* threw."

Dorothy wheeled to face him. Again she caught the gleam of laughter in the usually serious eyes.

"I believe I can," she said sharply. "Wasn't it the left rear, Mr. Keller?"

Dorothy almost whispered the last name, and an instant later could have bitten her tongue for mentioning it at all. Nevertheless, she experienced a distinct thrill of gratification at his reaction. He started visibly, and a look of almost blank astonishment overspread his face.

"Just what do you mean by that?" he demanded, and she saw that his eyes had gone narrow and cold.

Dorothy forced a laugh. "Why, nothing, of course! I just heard the name used in connection with a bandit in Piñon County, and I wanted to see the look on your face when I sprang it on you. It was so funny! You looked positively guilty for a second or two. But of course *you* couldn't be Al Keller; his description doesn't fit you at all."

She saw the tenseness go out of his muscles, saw the cold fire die from his eyes. When he spoke his voice was as drawling as ever.

"You did give me a start. Folks don't usually call a man by an outlaw's name without some reason."

"I'm sorry," lied Dorothy; then she looked at him archly. "There's a nice moon tonight. Can I make amends by asking you to take me for a little ride after supper?"

He gazed at her thoughtfully for a few seconds, then turned his head and looked out toward the range of mountains to the north.

"I'm sorry," he said at last. "I'm pretty tired; I reckon I'd better turn in right early."

Dorothy, for once, swallowed her pride. She was an officer of the law, working for the time under orders. "Very well," she said sweetly. "Some other time then."

She nodded brightly and turned toward the pinto. His refusal of her condescending offer but added another injury to the rapidly growing string. Dorothy reached up and touched the hard surface of the deputy's star.

"I suppose he is tired," she said grimly. "He probably did a lot of riding last night."

Behind her Bob Shannon was scratching his head thoughtfully.

"Keller, huh?" he murmured. "Now where in heck did she get hold of that name?"

## V

DOROTHY had her ride in the moonlight after all. In the company of Fred Rellek she swung out across the rangeland shortly after supper, taking pains to time her departure when Bob Shannon was sitting outside the bunkhouse smoking.

Fred Rellek fell far short of being an ideal riding companion in Dorothy's estimation. He was much too awkward in the saddle, and his journey to the Lazy 8 and back appeared to have taken its toll in stiff muscles if one could judge by the cautious and painful way he eased his leg over the rump of his horse in mounting. Also Fred was prone to permit his mount to choose its own gait, while Dorothy liked to travel fast enough to feel the breeze tug at her hair. But

Fred was cheerful and agreeable, and that made the slow progress endurable.

They didn't ride very far. After all, the trip was staged entirely for the benefit of one who called himself Bob Shannon. Dorothy knew that nothing makes a woman more desirable in the eyes of a certain man than the knowledge that she is equally desirable in the eyes of others. Possibly the next time she suggested a canter in the moonlight, Mr. Shannon —or Keller—would not be so terribly tired and worn-out.

So Dorothy reasoned, and her logic was perfectly sound. For as she and Rellek walked their mounts around the corral, Bob Shannon dropped his cigarette, methodically ground it into the dirt with a savage boot heel and muttered something that sounded a whole lot like "damn!"

When Dorothy and her escort returned, most of the men had retired. She thanked Rellek perfunctorily for the "nice ride" and went into the house, leaving him to care for the horses. She was reading when Rellek came in, and after wishing her a cheerful good night, the tenderfoot went to his room. Her father had already retired.

Dorothy stuck with the book for an hour, then tiring of reading every third page over a second time, went to her own room and prepared for bed. She wasn't a bit sleepy; things were becoming too complex. She lay there flat on her back and stared up at the ceiling for a long while; and as she reviewed the events of the day she was forced to the conclusion that the task she had set herself was more difficult of accomplishment than she had imagined.

For now Dorothy found herself with two suspicious characters to watch. She had been perfectly sure that Bob Shannon and Al Keller were one and the same, until she had found Tug Gleason shoeing his horse. Tug had spoken to her respectfully enough, but there was a sullen note in his voice that she hadn't liked. But then Gleason was always surly.

Of course, her suggestion that it was the left rear shoe that had been cast was designed to give him the opportunity of saying that it was the right one. In that event Dorothy would have felt sure that he was lying and would have transferred her suspicions to him at once. But he had either been honest in his reply or he had seen through her strategy.

And then that insufferable Bob Shannon had slipped up behind her and had laughed with his eyes just as though he knew all the time what she was trying to discover, and was getting a great kick out of her sleuthing activities. And he had recently reshod his horse—had volunteered the information while his eyes laughed at her again. Confound the fellow! He had handsome eyes, with long, curly lashes that in contrast to his coppery hair, were quite dark.

She pictured him again as he stood outside the bunkhouse rolling a cigarette. There was something clean and wholesome and altogether appealing about him. Dorothy began to wish that Tug Gleason were the guilty one after all. She decided now that it would not have been impossible for Tug to have staged the hold-up. As foreman, Gleason had a cabin to himself. He could have slipped away at dusk, held up the Limited and returned by dawn and nobody on the JH would have been the wiser.

But argue as she would, Dorothy could not get around the fact that Bob Shannon was the man with the black hat and blue shirt that Sheriff Anderson had followed to the JH. The very fact that Shannon had changed both articles of wearing apparel before appearing on the ranch was proof in Dorothy's eyes that he had something to conceal. No, it began to look very much as though the new special deputy had two criminals on her hands instead of one.

Dorothy turned over on her side with a little sigh of perplexity and closed her eyes preparatory to sleep. She must have dozed, for she was riding over the range with a big, handsome cowboy with coppery curls and dark eyelashes. He challenged her to a race and they broke into a gallop. Their horses' hoofs were thudding rhythmically. . . .

Dorothy opened her eyes. For a moment she thought she was actually flying over the grassland, for the thud of hoofs was very plain in her ears. She sat up in bed. The moonlight was streaming through the open window and from the direction of the corral came the sound of scurrying hoofs that had aroused her.

She got up and ran to the window. Something was disturbing the animals in the corral, that was certain. Then Dorothy gasped and drew back a bit so that her face would not be visible in the moonlight.

The horses were milling about in the way they had when somebody attempted to get his rope on one of them. And there was a man in the corral—a man on foot who stood warily with trailing loop waiting for the exact moment to make his cast. She could not recognize his features or any detail about his dress that might betray his identity.

Presently the loop shot out and settled over the head of one of the milling horses. The animal stopped abruptly, knowing the futility of fighting the rope. Docilely he followed through the corral gate and submitted to the saddle.

Dorothy ran back to the bed and started pulling on her clothes. After all, this deputy job properly belonged to a man. He could sleep in his clothes without discomfort. She strapped on her gunbelt with its holstered thirty-eight and ran lightly for the door. By the time she had reached the gallery the mysterious prowler had vanished.

She scouted about the buildings, keeping to the shadows as much as she could. There seemed to be not a thing stirring. Yet somebody had taken a horse from the corral and had saddled and ridden him away. Dorothy wished more than ever that she were a man so that she might search the bunkhouse; then, since that wish did not accomplish a thing, she went into the house, pushed open the door to her father's room and walked over to the bed.

"Dad!" she called softly. "It's me. Somebody just took a horse out of the corral—"

She broke off abruptly. Her hands, feeling over the surface of the bed, had encountered nothing but the rumpled quilt. She noticed now that the room was absolutely silent. The deep, heavy breathing of a sleeping man was missing. Her father was not in his bed.

Dorothy stood there thinking for a moment. If it had been her father who had caught up the horse. . . . But Jud Holmes kept Major, his big black, in the stable, and it did not seem likely that he would go to the trouble of roping a mount from the corral. Besides, what would take him abroad in the middle of the night?

Dorothy went to the kitchen and put a handful of matches in the pocket of her riding skirt. Then she strode to the stable and by the light of one of the matches looked carefully about her.

Major was not in his stall. Her father, then, had not been the man she had seen. Perhaps he too had been awakened by the milling horses and had slipped out to the barn while she was dressing. In that event he was probably following the prowler, whoever he was.

Dorothy went down to the little shed where the boys in the bunkhouse kept their rigs. Striking another match, she glanced along the row of pegs upon which the saddles were hung. One of the pegs was empty. Using matches freely, Dorothy began

at the end of the row and went over each rig in turn. She knew the saddle of every man on the spread, and she identified each one hanging there. At the end of her inspection she drew in her breath with a little sucking sound.

The missing saddle belonged to Bob Shannon.

For a few seconds she was tempted to throw her rig on the pinto and start in pursuit, but a moment's reflection convinced her of the foolishness of this. She did not even know the direction Shannon had taken. At last she started back toward the house, determined to remain on watch until the night riders returned to the ranch.

On her way she passed the cabin occupied by Tug Gleason. It occurred to her that Tug kept his saddle in the cabin, and she wondered if it was hanging on the peg in its accustomed place. Probably it was, for she had accounted for the missing man, she thought. Nevertheless. . . .

Dorothy edged nearer the open window and stood there listening for the snores that should betray the presence of the foreman. She heard none. She moved directly to the window and stood with her head cocked to one side, ear directly in the opening. Not a sound reached her.

Dorothy tightened her lips determinedly, drew out a match and, reaching inside the window, scraped it against the sill. The light flared up and in its momentary glare she caught a glimpse of Gleason's bunk.

It, too, was unoccupied.

Dorothy leaned weakly against the wall of the cabin. It was just too much for her. Instead of one night prowler there seemed to be three, and one of them was her own father! What sinister plan had taken Shannon and the foreman away from the ranch in the dead of night? What had become of her father? Had he seen them depart and followed in an effort to apprehend them?

Dorothy walked back into the house and seated herself by the window in her room. She would wait there until their return.

The hours passed, but the girl sat there wide awake and alert. The moon died and the gray of false dawn flooded the sky. Then came the period of darkness that immediately precedes the true dawn, and still there was no sign of the returning horsemen. A faint streak of light showed in the eastern sky; objects became discernible; a light appeared in the cook shack, followed by a tiny curl of smoke from the chimney.

Then the bunkhouse door opened and into view came Bob Shannon!

Dorothy jerked erect, tired muscles reacting involuntarily. And even as she stared, the door of the foreman's cabin opened and Tug Gleason came out. He soused his head in a tin basin of water, blowing like a huge porpoise.

Dorothy got to her feet and her lips were tight. She could have sworn that neither man had returned while she was watching. They must have tied their horses behind the outbuildings and stolen into their respective beds with all the caution of weasels.

She walked down the hall and halted before her father's door. From within the room came the sound of steady, rhythmic breathing. She knew without looking that her sire had returned without attracting her attention.

Dorothy realized now that Jud Holmes could have brought the black in by the rear stable door, in which event she would not have been able to see him from her bedroom window. Likewise, he could easily have gotten into the house without detection by merely using a bit of caution. Evidently he had done so and it was this that worried Dorothy.

Jud Holmes owned the ranch and was answerable to nobody for his actions. If he wanted to ride at night, that was his business—so long as he did it openly. But stealth seemed to go hand in hand with guilt.

Dorothy's teeth clicked together. Whatever her dad had done was perfectly all right; she would never believe anything different. The thing to do was to determine why Tug Gleason and Bob Shannon had sneaked away and back. She felt sure they had committed some unlawful action.

She walked to the kitchen, found Teresa up and about, and with a short word of greeting passed through the rear door. She stood for a minute or two drinking in deep breaths of the fragrant air, then sauntered with apparent aimlessness to a point from which she could see the rear of both bunkhouse and foreman's cabin. One look was enough.

Both Bob and Tug were busy rubbing down their horses.

## VI

BREAKFAST was a rather somber meal. Dorothy was absorbed by her problem, her father seemed morose and short-tempered, and Fred Rellek complained of muscles sore and stiff from his long ride to the Lazy 8 and back.

"I ought to be accustomed to riding by this time," he said querulously. "Instead, I seem to get stiffer after each long trip."

"You oughta let your stirrups out," replied Jud. "Nobody but a park dude rides with his knees under his chin."

Rellek sighed. "I always noticed that jockeys rode with short stirrups, and it seemed to me that they should know best."

Jud grunted. "I reckon you never seen them ride more than two miles at a stretch," he said dryly. "You goin' to buy that stuff from the Lazy 8?"

"I think so," replied Rellek. "In fact, I had considered riding over there today and paying for the stock, but I'm so sore I guess I'd better put it off until tomorrow. By the way, I suppose they'll take a check on the Calder bank for the amount. It won't be necessary for me to go to town and get the cash, will it?"

"Check's all right," answered Holmes. "You rub yourself with that hawss liniment I gave you and rest up today. You can jog twenty miles to that line cabin tomorrow, spend the night there and finish your trip the next day."

"I think that's a good suggestion," said Rellek, and excused himself.

When he had gone to his room, Dorothy looked across the table at her father.

"Dad," she said quietly, "where did you go last night?"

Jud Holmes looked up quickly. "Who told you I went anywhere?"

"Nobody told me. Someone caught up a horse from the corral and saddled him and I went to your room to tell you about it. You were gone. Afterwards I went to the stable and found Major had been taken out."

"You say you saw somebody in the corral; did you recognize him?"

"No; that's why I went after you—I wanted you to look in the bunkhouse. I looked over the saddles and found Bob Shannon's missing. And then, to cap the climax, I discovered that Gleason wasn't in his cabin either."

Jud Holmes' eyes were on his plate and he was frowning. "That's funny, ain't it? I heard somebody in the corral, too. I got Major and tried to follow him. He started toward Calder and I rode almost to town tryin' to catch up with him. He musta ducked me somewhere along the trail. I'll speak to Tug and Shannon."

"I wouldn't, if I were you," said Dorothy. "If either of them is guilty of anything, we'll hear about it soon enough and can question them then. If we go after them now, we will merely be warning them. It's my opinion that you picked up two lemons when you signed on those men. Tug has criminal written all over his face, and Shannon—well, I suppose he's one of those gentlemen crooks you read about."

She got up and went outside, leaving her father staring after her. She was mystified and still a bit angry at the way all three had slipped into their beds under her very nose.

Dorothy threw her saddle on the pinto and struck out along the Calder trail. Her father had said that the night rider—or riders—had taken this direction, and besides, the road led by the little nook on the creek where she liked to go when tired or depressed.

She half expected to meet the sheriff and his deputy on their way to the JH with news of some fresh hold-up; consequently, when she caught sight of two horsemen at the fringe of trees near her retreat, she put the pinto to a run to meet them. As she approached the horsemen turned to watch her, and Dorothy noticed with a little shock of surprise that the two were Bob Shannon and Tug Gleason.

She checked her horse immediately, and as she did so, Tug said something to Shannon and jogged off toward Calder. Bob urged his horse forward to meet her.

"Good mornin'," he said politely, raising the gray Stetson and smiling. Had Dorothy followed her inclination she would have revealed her knowledge of his night riding and demanded an explanation then and there; but she remembered her rôle of vamp, doubly important now that the situation had become so complicated. So she smiled and asked him if he had gotten a good night's rest.

"Couldn't sleep a wink," he admitted brazenly. "But I feel better now." He nodded toward the little nook. "You come here—often?"

"Very often. It's cool, and quiet, and shady. Let's ride over."

He fell in beside her and rode in silence to the fringe of trees. They dismounted and, penetrating the bushes along the bank, sat down on the boulder she had occupied when he had first ridden into her life.

Shannon removed his hat and ran his fingers through the coppery curls.

"It is cool, and quiet, and shady," he said slowly. "Funny that you should like it—you bein' so different."

"What do you mean?" asked Dorothy.

He grinned frankly. "Well, you can be cool enough when you want to, but I'd hardly call you quiet. And, of course, there's nothin' *shady* about you at all."

Dorothy looked away hurriedly. She had caught the play on words as she felt he had intended she should. He had meant that there was nothing deceitful about her and Dorothy thought suddenly of the deputy's star that she was wearing and of the plan she had formulated for worming from this man the secret of his guilt.

"You don't know me well enough to judge," she said faintly.

"I reckon I do," he answered calmly. "You see, character stands out on a person's face like—like it does on that of a hawss. When you see a bronc with a Roman nose, you know he's natchally stubborn and ready to lay down on the job every chance he gets. A hawss with a straight nose but with starin' eyes and a crease beside 'em that you can mebbe lay your finger in, you can figger as a nervous animal, always rarin' to go and sweat hisself into a lather.

"When you see one that's dish-faced and usually with hairy ears, you know he's an outlaw that never can be trusted. And when you meet up with one that has a nice straight nose and gentle eyes set far apart, and a nice slope up his forehead to his ears, you know you got a prince among hawsses. He'll do what you want him to do; he'll trust you; he'll be as loyal to you as the day is long."

He turned to grin at her as she sat staring at him.

"Not meanin' to be disparagin' by comparin' you with a hawss," he concluded. "I placed you in that last class the minute I saw you, ma'am."

Something stirred deep within the

girl, and perhaps because she felt its warning, she resorted to flippancy.

"Why on earth did you do that? Because I have a straight nose? Or was it because of the nice slope to my ears?"

"No'm," he answered gravely. "You don't use the same methods to read a human bein' as you do a hawss; but the shape of the head, the light in the eye and the way a person carries hisself show up the thoroughbred in man and woman just as it does in a hawss."

"According to that, what class do you find yourself in? Are you a Roman-nosed bull-head, a wild-eyed nervous wreck, or—or a dish-faced outlaw?"

He was grinning again, a bit ruefully. "Why, now, you don't even give me a chance to qualify as a thoroughbred." He rubbed his hand over his coppery hair. "And I'm a sorrel, too; the same as a great many thoroughbreds."

"I've always understood that red hair in a man or woman stands for temper," said Dorothy.

"Don't you believe that, ma'am! Why, some of the best natured and laziest cusses I ever knowed had red hair. I'm one of them."

Dorothy glanced sidewise at him. She was seeing him in an entirely new light—that of a genial, cowboy philosopher. He was smiling reflectively as he gazed across the creek, and his eyes were crinkled in a way that bespoke nothing but good humor and peace with the world. For the moment he appeared more the easy-going boy than the hardened criminal.

Dorothy knew instinctively that the time to win his confidence had come, yet at the thought of worming information from him she felt a little qualm of reluctance. Then her fingers went to the inside of her vest and rested lightly on the hard surface of the hidden deputy badge. She spoke impulsively.

"Bob, I wish you'd tell me what they want you for. Of course I know that you are the man Mr. Anderson chased to the JH. I know that you changed your hat and shirt to throw him off the trail. I should think you'd realize that I could have turned you over to the law before this if I had wanted to. Tell me about it. Maybe I can help you. Will you trust me?"

She had turned to him and placed one hand on his arm, and for a few seconds after her abrupt plea the two of them gazed steadily into each other's eyes. Under his level regard Dorothy's gaze wavered, and, removing her hand, she turned her head away.

Then, before either of them could speak, there came from some point nearby the sudden, loud neigh of a horse.

Involuntarily Dorothy turned swiftly to stare at Shannon. She saw that he had gone tense, and that his eyes were very narrow and fixed on a point downstream from which the sound had seemed to come.

He got to his feet. "I reckon I'll be ridin' on, ma'am," he said, and he was no longer smiling. "A minute ago you asked me to trust you, yet you had even then placed me in the class with the dish-faced, hairy-eared outlaw hawss. You ask for trust, but you don't want to give it yourself. You're playin' a part that don't fit your character at all. Good mornin', ma'am."

He nodded curtly, put on his Stetson and walked swiftly through the brush toward his horse.

Dorothy sat watching him, for once unable to find an answer. That vague stirring deep within her was urging her to follow—to call him back—to tell him that she would play fair. She smothered it with a resolve that was almost grim. Again her hand flew up to grip the deputy badge. She was an officer of the law on the trail of a criminal; she mustn't forget that, not even if the person she suspected was handsome and soft-spoken, and not a bit aloof when one got to know him.

Dorothy got up at last and went to her horse. Bob Shannon was riding

toward the ranch, and even as she watched, he disappeared over a rise in the trail. She was on the point of following when she remembered the neigh. She wondered now if it could have been Tug Gleason's horse. If so, what was his object in spying on them?

She reined around abruptly and urged her horse along the bank of the creek. She came at last to a thick clump of alders, and forced the pinto through the brush which surrounded them. Then she drew rein abruptly.

In the midst of the alders was a cleared space, around which ropes had been stretched. It was a hide-out corral; and in the inclosure was a horse with the JH brand!

## VII

THE day dragged by without any developments. A bit to Dorothy's surprise the sheriff failed to put in an appearance, and not the slightest rumor of a murder or fresh hold-up reached the ranch.

Bob Shannon and the foreman had remained out of her way, her father rode into Calder on some unmentioned business, and Fred Rellek stuck closely to his room, beneath the door of which filtered a strong aroma of liniment.

Dorothy caught the scent on the way to her room and her lips curled a bit contemptuously. Anything savoring of weakness in a man was intolerable to her, and despite herself she mentally compared this suavely speaking, saddle-sore pilgrim with the virile, level-eyed cowboy who read a person's character as he would that of a horse.

Dorothy frowned at remembrance of what he had told her. She was a thoroughbred, he had said, instinctively good and loyal and aboveboard. There was nothing shady about her, in his estimation, and he had warned her that the part she was playing was not in keeping with the virtues with which he had endowed her.

Quite suddenly Dorothy found herself hating this deputy's job; then, realizing that the dislike was prompted by that inner stirring that was beginning to alarm her, she vowed for the fiftieth time to go through with it and bring the criminal to justice regardless of who he was.

It occurred to her now that Bob Shannon, too, might have been playing a part. He might have deliberately made himself agreeable in order to hold her spellbound, while Tug Gleason removed the horse to a safer distance. Probably the loud neigh of the animal had frightened Tug away. At any rate, Dorothy believed that the hidden animal would afford the means of identifying the lone bandit who had held up the Limited.

She had examined the left hind shoe of the horse and had found it to be unimpaired. It just seemed that the broken calk would never again be a factor in the case. Certainly if Bob Shannon or the foreman were guilty, the one clue to the identity of the bandit had been destroyed before this.

So Dorothy told herself preparatory to an afternoon nap. The night had been a sleepless one, and indications were that she would spend the coming one in a rather active manner. For Dorothy had decided that whoever had placed the horse in the alders had done so to facilitate his getaway after committing a crime of some kind, and had determined to be on hand when he appeared to use the animal.

Her father returned in time for supper. He was grim of face and short of speech. Evidently he had something on his mind. Fred Rellek was there, too, cheerful once more. The liniment, he explained, had accomplished miracles. He would set out for the Lazy 8 the following morning and consummate the deal that would establish him as a cattleman on a small basis.

After supper Dorothy managed to get her father alone in his office and

asked him outright what the trouble was.

"Oh, it ain't much," said Jud Holmes reluctantly. "I didn't aim to tell you about it at all, Dot. I was aimin' to make a few improvements and I tried to get a loan at the Calder bank. They turned me down. Said things were too tight to do much lendin' now. I don't really need the money, but it sorta disappointed me not to get it."

Dorothy prepared for her night's activities methodically. With Fred Rellek accompanying her, she went for a ride, returning to the ranch just after dusk. She insisted on caring for her own horse, lingering over the job until Rellek had stabled his mount and returned to the house. Then under cover of the darkness, she swiftly threw her rig back on the astonished pinto and led him to a clump of trees in the rear of the house, where she tied him.

Cautiously she made a circuit of the buildings, keeping well in the gloom. She discovered two things of importance: Tug Gleason was not on the spread and Bob Shannon had concealed his horse behind the blacksmith shop.

Dorothy went into the house and played seven-up with her father and Rellek until Fred complained of being sleepy. Dorothy herself was anxious to terminate the game, and her father invariably retired early. All three were in their rooms before nine o'clock.

The girl deputy took time only to buckle on her thirty-eight, then slipped quietly from her room and out of the back door. Circling warily, she came to the blacksmith shop and crouched by the forge, waiting.

Barely a half hour had passed when she heard footsteps back of the building, followed by a soft whicker from the horse and a low word of assurance in a voice that she recognized as Shannon's. Saddle leather creaked, a spur chain jingled, then came the dull plump of hoofs made by a walking horse.

The girl deputy slipped from her cover and peered around the back wall of the building. The moon was just rising, and she could easily make out the dim form of the horseman as he headed for the Calder trail. Dorothy hurried to where her pinto was tied, mounted quickly and walked the animal around the horse corral and into the road from that direction. Her quarry had vanished in the gloom, but Dorothy had no doubt of his destination. As soon as she could safely do so, she put the pinto to a fast lope, eyes on the trail ahead.

An hour passed . . . two . . . and Dorothy, who had not once sighted Bob Shannon, urged her pony to a faster gait. At last she caught sight of him as he topped a rise only two hundred yards away. The girl immediately pulled her horse off the trail into the shadows at the edge of the creek. Here the high grass deadened the sound of the pinto's hoofs.

Dorothy had covered half the distance that separated them when she saw Shannon pull up his horse near the hidden corral and peer about as though in search of somebody. Dorothy was not a bit surprised when a second form materialized from the gloom of the alders and advanced to meet the horseman.

The second man said something in a voice that did not carry to her, and waved his hand toward the moonlit Calder trail. Shannon nodded and spurred his horse toward town. The second man watched him until the gloom had swallowed both horse and rider, then squatted on his heels by a tree, back toward the girl.

Dismounting, Dorothy led the pinto back among the trees and tied him. Then she took the rope from her saddle horn, drew the thirty-eight and proceeded to stalk her unsuspecting victim.

It was not a difficult task. The man was sitting on his heels quietly smoking, eyes staring ahead of him toward Calder. She slipped from tree to tree,

careful not to make the slightest sound, and at last found herself crouching less than five feet from him.

"Put up your hands, Tug Gleason!" the girl said sharply. Stepping forward, she jammed the muzzle of the thirty-eight into his back.

She saw the man jerk as though he had been suddenly pricked by a pin, then his hands crept skyward. Dorothy draped the rope over her gun arm and, reaching forward with her left hand, plucked Tug's weapon from its holster and flung it as far into the brush as she could.

"Lie down on your face and cross your hands behind you," she ordered.

"Ma'am, you're makin' a mistake," Tug began; but she cut him short.

"You needn't explain; it won't do you a bit of good."

For a single moment he hesitated, and Dorothy took advantage of that moment to cock her gun. The click evidently decided Tug. He sighed resignedly and rolled over on his side and thence to his stomach. Dorothy knew her rope—and her knots. When she had finished with Tug nothing short of a steel blade would free him. She had bound him to a tree and gagged him effectually by stuffing her neckerchief into his mouth and tying it in place with the one he wore. Tug could gurgle faintly, but that was all.

Dorothy worked her way back through the gloom of the alders to the ropes which formed the boundaries of the little corral. It was dark here, the trees shutting out the light of the moon; but she could see a horse nibbling at the grass in the inclosure. There in the gloom she waited for another two hours; and while she waited. . . .

A rapidly riding horseman swung along the Calder trail. He sat his horse with an ease that bespoke long practice, swaying slightly to the stride of the animal beneath him. He was dressed in dark clothes and a black Stetson was drawn low over his forehead. The part of his face below the glinting eyes was covered with a black neckerchief, which whipped in the breeze of his passage.

As he approached the town he gradually slowed his mount to a lope, a trot, then a walk. And at last, in the very shadow of Calder itself, he halted the animal; dismounting, he drew a rather peculiar device from a gunny sack which was tied to the cantle. It was a shell-like affair of wrought iron, made to fit over a horse's hoof; and on the bottom was welded a complete shoe with one of the calks broken.

The bandit raised the left hind foot of his horse to a position between his knees, and carefully fitted the device over the hoof—shoe and all. At the back of the hock he fastened it with strap and buckle. It raised the left foot a half inch from the ground, but would not hamper the animal for the short time it would be kept in place.

The bandit swung into the saddle and urged his mount into an alley which led to the rear of the Calder bank. The animal plodded slowly, puffing a bit from his long run. The bank building loomed up ahead of him and he drew the horse to a halt. And as he did so, an orange flame stabbed the shadows under one wall of the building, and the still night reverberated to the sound of a barking Colt.

Instantly the bandit wheeled his mount and dashed back along the alley. A volley of shots and curses followed him. The shots came from the carefully hidden posse; the curses fell from the lips of the irate Sheriff Anderson, and were directed toward the blankety-blank fool who'd tipped their hand by firing prematurely.

Neither shots nor curses stopped the bandit. Stretched low along the neck of his straining horse, he reached the trail which led to the JH and passed it. Not until he had covered several miles did he draw rein, and then only long enough to dismount, remove the false shoe device and toss it to one

side. Remounting, he circled back into the JH trail and put the animal to its fastest pace.

And behind him, Sheriff Anderson paused in the pursuit long enough to strike a match and examine a set of tracks.

"Broken calk on left hind shoe," he said grimly. "Jest what I thought."

## VIII

DOROTHY HOLMES stiffened in a listening attitude and gripped her thirty-eight more tightly. Back along the Calder trail hoofs were drumming; and by the sound of their steady roll, she knew that the horseman who was approaching was driving his mount at its fastest gait.

The animal in the corral lifted its head and stood listening for a few seconds, then with a little whicker, trotted to the center of the inclosure. It was the first time that the horse had taken a position where Dorothy could see him clearly in the moonlight, and suddenly she felt a little chill travel slowly down her spine.

The animal was Major, her father's mount!

Dorothy's first reaction was one of stunned apprehension. She remembered her father's actions of the previous night and his disappointment at failure to secure a loan from the bank. By hiding in the blacksmith shop where she could watch Shannon's horse, she had sacrificed her chance to keep an eye on the stable. Jud Holmes might easily have gotten his horse without detection.

But she simply couldn't believe this. No; somebody else had used her father's horse and only time would tell who it was.

She heard the approaching horseman pull up sharply, heard the plump of hoofs as the horse was walked toward the little corral. Then the vague forms of animal and rider showed as lighter blobs against the dark background of the trees. Leather creaked as the man swung to the ground and proceeded to strip bridle and saddle from the animal he had been riding. Crawling under the ropes, he walked to Major's left side and slipped on the bridle.

As he flung the saddle over the horse's back, Dorothy ran forward, her boots making no sound on the soft ground. When the man straightened after fastening the latigo straps, he was looking over the back of the horse into Dorothy's thirty-eight.

"Put up your hands!" ordered the girl in a fierce whisper.

For three short seconds the man opposite her seemed paralyzed. She could not see his face and felt that her own features were hidden by the gloom. Then, with a suddenness that was startling, he dropped from her sight on the far side of the horse. Before Dorothy could change position he had dodged under the animal's head and had flung himself at her.

She struggled fiercely in his grasp; but despite her lithe strength she might as easily have been wrestling a grizzly. She was tripped suddenly and thrown violently to the earth; and as she fell, her head struck a protruding stone and the world went blank in a shower of fiery rockets.

The bandit led Major from the corral, stood listening to the far-off beat of pursuing hoofs, then leaped to the saddle and broke the black horse into a furious run.

A little later Sheriff Anderson and his posse pulled up at the corral. They lingered just long enough to find it empty of horseflesh; then hearing the roll of hoofbeats a half mile ahead of them, lost no time in continuing the pursuit.

Dorothy stirred at last and sat up. Her head was whirling and there was a lump on it the size of an egg. Her thick hair had saved her from a serious hurt. The sound of rapidly diminishing hoofbeats brought to her a realization of what had transpired. How long she had lain there she could

not know; but several men were riding toward the JH in pursuit of the bandit.

She went to the creek and bathed the lump on her head with the cool water. The dizziness disappeared as did some of the pain. Returning to the corral, Dorothy struck a match and by its light located the thirty-eight. She picked up the gun and strode to the tree where she had tied Tug Gleason. As quickly as she could, she freed his legs and removed the gag.

"Lead me to your horse," she ordered crisply.

Without a word the surly Gleason led the way to one side of the trail where a horse stood tied. Dorothy unfastened the animal and pushed Tug into the saddle. Then at a brief word from her, he led the way to where she had tied her pinto. Herding Tug before her, Dorothy made for the ranch.

It was dawn by the time they rode up to the house and dismounted. A half dozen horses stood with drooping heads by the hitching-rack and voices came to them through the open living room door.

Dorothy asked her captive a single question: "Who was your partner?"

"Bob Shannon," replied Gleason, "but—"

"That's all I wanted to know," answered Dorothy coldly.

"Aw, hell," said Tug without heat. Following the unspoken command of the thirty-eight, he walked up the steps and into the room, Dorothy behind him.

Dorothy saw a great deal in the first quick glance she flung about her. She saw her father, apparently just aroused from bed and plainly worried. Facing him was Sheriff Anderson and Bob Shannon. Fred Rellek, partly dressed, stood to one side. His eyes widened as he saw the girl and her prisoner come into the room.

"By George!" he exclaimed. "Sheriff, you're wrong after all! Here is Miss Dorothy with the real culprit. Mr. Holmes is no more guilty than I am."

The girl was looking at Bob Shannon, and again she saw that little hint of laughter in the blue eyes.

"Yes, Sheriff Anderson," she heard herself saying, "you're wrong. I don't know what has happened, but I've been watching two men. I caught Tug Gleason waiting at the little corral in the alders. He has just confessed who his partner is." She walked directly to Bob Shannon and looked into the gently mocking eyes. "Bob Shannon, alias Al Keller, I arrest you for robbery."

And she turned back her vest to show him the badge.

"Why—why—wait a minute!" sputtered the bewildered sheriff. "Holy cats, Dorothy! You cain't go arrestin' that man."

"I'd like to know why I can't," said Dorothy evenly. "I'm a deputy sheriff, sworn in by you yourself."

"Shore you are! But holy cats, ma'am! The fella you're arrestin' is a United States deputy marshal!"

## IX

ONCE more the world reeled, but this time it was not from the contact of head on stone. For what seemed ages Dorothy could only stare at the eyes before her—eyes which had lost their mocking light and were all sympathy.

It was, perhaps, the pitying light which drove Dorothy from the room. She could bear up under his indifference; she could smile contemptuously at his scorn; but sympathy from this man at this time was simply unbearable.

She had intended going directly to her room and locking herself in, but she had not taken a dozen steps before a hand grasped her by the arm and swung her about. Before she could even order him to release her, Bob Shannon was talking swiftly, his voice vibrant with feeling.

"Miss Holmes—Dorothy! Please listen to me. I know I deceived you, but I just simply had to. Sheriff Anderson and me were up against a desperate criminal; couldn't overlook a single bet in tryin' to capture him. I had Anderson chase me to the JH so that I would appear a fugitive.

"I changed my hat and shirt to help the deception. And when you got to suspectin' me, we had to let it stand because your actions were divertin' suspicion from the guilty one. Dorothy, girl, if you just knew what it cost me to refuse your offer of friendship—to pass up that ride in the moonlight—"

"I don't believe it cost you even a moment of regret. I detest you, Bob Shannon. And if you're so smart, who is the real Al Keller?"

"I don't know," he answered gloomily. "Tug and me found that hidden hawss and after tippin' off the sheriff to be on guard, figgered on nabbin' him when he came for it. Anderson is tryin' to pin the attempted robbery of the bank on your daddy. I don't believe he done it."

"He didn't," said Dorothy, the plight of her parent jarring from her head all thoughts of personal vengeance. "The man who had hidden Major in that corral fought with me when I tried to capture him. He's much slimmer than Dad, and even stronger. I know it wasn't my father."

"Yet it was somebody on this spread," said Shannon quietly. "We trailed him right here and Major is in his stall. The boys in the bunkhouse are all accounted for, and Tug Gleason has been helpin' me right along. That leaves just two besides yourself—your father and Rellek."

Shannon's blue eyes were narrow and cold. "Just how does this fella spell his name—R-e-l-i-c?"

"No. R-e-l-l-e-k. It's a peculiar name; it—Bob! Spell it backward! K-e-l-l-e-r! See?"

"And the first name is Fred—Alfred. Dorothy, he's our man!"

He caught her by the hand and she clutched the strong fingers and hurried back into the living room with him. They stopped inside the doorway.

"Where's Rellek?" demanded Shannon.

"I don't know," answered Anderson. "What do you want with him?"

"Want with him! Why, man, he's the one who held up the train! Come on, Dorothy."

"Bob, you're loco!" the sheriff shouted after them. "That tenderfoot couldn't ride from here to the bunkhouse at more'n a walk."

"Spell his name backwards!" cried Bob over his shoulder.

The faint drum of hoofs came to him as they ran for the corral. The JH punchers were grouped about the bunkhouse, and to a man they were staring after a figure that lay stretched far over the neck of a rapidly traveling horse.

"Well, my sainted grandma!" exclaimed one of them. "That tenderfoot shore learned to fork a hawss overnight! Look at him roll up the dust!"

"Catch up two hawsses," said Bob to the girl. "I'll get the rigs."

Sheriff Anderson had evidently succeeded in spelling Rellek's name backward, for he came out of the house at a run and flung himself into his saddle. Followed by the posse, he was swinging over the range toward the line cabin before Bob and Dorothy could get mounted.

Once in the saddle they made up for lost time. Their mounts were fresh; those of the sheriff's party were spent after their long pursuit. Bob and the girl deputy quickly caught up with the posse . . . passed it. Far ahead the Fred Rellek that was, rode like a demon, his lips twisted into a snarl and his eyes glinting with the hate of a cornered rattler.

Straight to the line cabin he led them, and dropped from his horse to dash through its doorway scarcely a hundred feet ahead of them.

Bob pulled up immediately, aware that a man behind the log walls of a cabin enjoys a certain advantage over adversaries in the open. Dorothy, however, kept on. Bob Shannon swore harshly and started after her on foot, calling upon her to turn back.

She did not heed him, but dismounted and ran straight through the doorway of the cabin. There was nothing for him to do but follow her, expecting at every stride to hear the thunder of Keller's Colt, prepared to find the girl sagging to the floor with a bullet through her heart. Al Keller was desperate; he would not hesitate, Bob felt sure.

Thus it was that he did the one thing that otherwise he would not have done—dashed directly into the cabin without first pausing to locate his enemy. And thus it was that a gun was jammed into his back as he leaped across the threshold in an effort to grasp Dorothy and drag her out of danger.

"Drop that gun and git over in that corner!" came the command in a venomous voice.

Dorothy had stopped in the middle of the floor and was staring over Bob's shoulder at the transformed Rellek. Her gun was still in its holster.

"Drop that hawg-laig and git in the corner, I said!" barked the outlaw. And Bob, his eyes still on Dorothy, reluctantly allowed the Colt to fall to the floor and moved across the room.

Bob Shannon groaned and prepared to throw himself at the desperate outlaw. Dorothy, to his surprise, was walking slowly toward Keller—and she was smiling!

"Freddy," she said, and her voice was soft and wheedling. "I don't believe you did it, and it wouldn't matter if you did. I rode here to help you get away. Give me the gun and I'll keep him covered while you get on your horse. Then we'll go away together!"

Keller did not know what to do. He dared not shift his gun to cover the girl without giving Shannon a chance to fly at him. And as he hesitated he flashed a quick, suspicious glance at the girl, and saw only the smiling lips and eager eyes.

The girl was walking a bit faster now, hand outstretched to take the gun.

"Give it to me, Freddy. I want to go with you. Don't you see? I want to help you. Give me the gun. . . . Quick, Bob! Help me! Quick!"

With a sudden swift leap she had reached Keller and grasped the barrel of the Colt with her extended hand. Lunging forward, she twisted it from its course, pushed it upward. She felt the tug of the recoil and bits of powder burned her hand as the weapon roared. Keller was a writhing serpent of strength and suppleness. He wrenched at the gun, struck at her, cursed her; but she hung on, at times swung completely off her feet.

Then Bob—her Bob—was beside her. He reached up and seized the gun just as it was torn from her hand by the snarling, cursing Keller.

Dorothy dragged herself over to a bunk and dropped wearily upon it. Somehow she felt no apprehension, no doubt of the outcome. Bob—her Bob—was fighting, and he was fighting for her.

It was a short struggle, but a fierce one. And at its end Al Keller, mail and express robber, lay supine upon the floor, unconscious. Bob picked up and holstered his own weapon and kicked Keller's gun under a bunk. Then he came over to the bunk and stood looking down at the girl.

"I reckon this is one time where a county deputy sorta outranks a United States marshal," he said solemnly. "Miss Deputy Sheriff Dorothy, I'm surrenderin' to the county authorities!"

But the way he gathered her into his arms would lead one to believe that it was really the other way about.

# Row-de-dow

By Tracy Spitler

**Everything was on the up and up for young Wilk Farron and the whole world seemed in tune, until somebody tried to run a ranny on him by hazing him into the matrimonial corral. And what could a mere man do, when the prettiest gal on the range looked upon him with favor?**

SNOW-CAPPED peaks showed faintly blue through golden haze; brown bald hills rolled down from them to circle the high country valley which was the headquarters ranch of the Box Triangle M. Quiet and sunlight hung over the buildings like a benediction. Wilk Farron drowsed in his bunk, content. He was certainly getting the breaks—a swell job with a toppy outfit in the best country on earth. Row-de-dow and a couple of yips! Where *couldn't* he go from there!

Then Limpy Haze stumped in with the mail. "Same ol' passel of junk. It's a cryin' out shame to make a man ride clean to town for it. You're the only one in the outfit, Wilk—'cept the ol' man, an' he's in Rawlins—to draw a letter." Limpy's beady little eyes glittered inquisitively; his nose twitched.

Wilk propped himself up on an elbow and grinned. "You sure enough look like a chipmunk reared up on his hind legs, hopin' for the best, hombre."

"Never you mind my looks; they suit me." Limpy straightened sagging shoulders and threw out a hollow chest defiantly. But his tone was wheedling, as he asked, "Ain't you goin' to read your letter, boss? It's got female writin' on it. Mebbe it's from your mother, if so you got a mother—or a sister—or a aunt.

"It'd sure have to be some lady blood kin on account of all other female persons, from the Ol' Man's niece on down, gripe you so. Which weakness, or whatever, I call plumb unnatural, an' you ought to do somethin' about it, 'stead of dodgin' like a wild cow ever' time—"

Limpy dodged a boot and departed from there. A few moments later Wilk's muscular length bounded through the door. "Just like," drawled the cook, who was placidly stropping a butcher knife on his boot sole, "he'd mistaken a porkypine for a chair cushion. What ails you, amigo?"

Wilk fanned the hazy gold of the early November air with an opened letter. Three riders and one ranch hand, lounging with Sunday afternoon ease against the sunny side of the slab bunkhouse, turned lazy eyes toward him. One murmured, "Is he shooin' chickens or somethin'?"

"I'll be a son of a gun," predicted Wilk, "if I ever— Gents an' others, get an earful of this."

The cook looked grave. "Wait! Is it somethin' fittin' for the Sabbath day? You see, on account of same I've done washed my ears and I'd sure hate to get 'em polluted. I'm likewise speakin' for all here present. Am I right, gents, or am I right?"

Wilk snorted. He scowled at the letter in his hand. He glared at his outfit. This thing had all the earmarks of a whizzer. But who among them was bright enough to start it? If, on the other hand, it was on the level—Good gosh!

His gray eyes raked the circle of faces before him. "Who in time," he grated, "is Priscilla Hale?"

The cook scraped his chin with the dull edge of the butcher knife and repeated parrot-like, "Priscilla Hale, Priscilla Hale? Sounds like a flavorin' extract to me. But don't you worry none, amigo. She must be a hearty girl on account of bein' Hale."

*"Hail, hail, the gang's all here,"* the ranch hand warbled. "Hail—I'd say that sounds like lousy weather an' tough goin', hombre. But that's the way love comes to you strong, silent women-hatin' gents. You lookin' for sympathy or congratulations?"

Wilk's jaw tightened. "Oh, hell! Quit actin' like a bunch of locoed yearlin's. If this isn't a whizzer—an' Lord help you all if it is—then it's damned serious. I've never heard of the girl. Has anybody? . . . How about you, Dunn? From the tales you tell, I figure you must've whacked a bull team into this here Seven Mile country.

"Anyhow, you've sure been on the ground long enough to've kept a pretty good tally on all comers. Rake your brain, hombre, an' produce some information."

The old rider, Dunn, scratched his grizzled head. "I dunno. Seems like there's some stranger folks over Box Elder way, on the ol' Wiles ranch, name of Hale. Seems like they got a girl they call Prissy. Reckon that'd be this 'un, Wilk? An' what about her?"

"Damned if I know." The young foreman scanned the letter bewilderedly. "But she won't marry me. Says so in black an' white. Reckon it's somethin' to have that settled, but—well, listen." They crowded around him as he read:

Mr. Wilk Farron, Foreman,
Box Triangle M Ranch,
Seven Mile, Wyo.

Sir:

I don't dare send through the U. S. mail my opinion of such a man as you because I'd be arrested, I guess; but at that, I'd sooner be arrested ten times over than marry you. I'd sooner marry the old Chinese laundryman in Seven Mile. But I'm not going to marry anybody. I guess a girl has some rights and if a girl wants to be an old maid that's her business.

However, my poor old father can't see it, and my mother is just as bad. They are tickled to death because a flashy four-flusher like you—only they're too innocent and good to sabe that you are a four-flusher—wants to marry me.

If I wasn't as homely as a mud fence and poor as a church mouse, I might be able to believe you're as crazy about me as you say. As it is, I can't figure out why you want to marry me. Anyway, you're not going to—not ever.

It would hurt my folks too much for me to be downright disobedient, so I have lied to them. I have told

them that you threw me over for another girl—a pretty girl with lots of money. I wanted to sound convincing, so I said the girl was Jessie McGraw, your boss' niece.

So I hope, in case you ever come to this ranch again—which heaven forbid—and my folks check up on my story, you'll be gentleman enough to back me up, though I doubt if you can act like a gentleman. But if you don't, I'll sic the dog on you and be glad of the chance.

Yours not at all,
Priscilla Hale.

Wilk mopped his brow and raised distracted eyes from the closely written pages. He saw the cook rolling on the ground, howling like a dog. The two young riders were taking feeble jabs at each other between guffaws. Limpy came running from the horse corral. Dunn was silent, looking quizzically at Wilk. The ranch hand clasped his knees and rocked back and forth.

"Lordy, Lordy," he chanted, "what's our fair-haired boy been up to? Ain't done right by our Prissy, huh? But the gal's got gumption. Wouldn't have Wilk on a bet, would she, hombres? Won't the Ol' Man be tickled pink, case he hears that his niece, Miss Jess, is goin' to tie up with a common cowpoke, even if same is now foreman? My, oh, my!"

"An' won't Miss Jess," put in a young rider, "just love it?" He grew serious for a minute. "I mean if that Prissy tells her sad tale to many, it'll cost you your job, Wilk. An' the Jess girl'll like plenty to see you on the skids, on account of you was never able to see her at all, sabe? Oh, my gosh"—the sight of Wilk, rigid with outraged rectitude, overcame him afresh—"I'm like to bust!"

"I sure as hell hope you do. Shut up an' let me think, can't you?"

"What with, amigo?" the cook wailed. "Not with your haid. You've done lost that. Or else this Prissy's turned it so complete you—"

"I don't know her, man, that's the point. Never heard of her. Never seen her. Bet if I had I'd 've run a mile. Homely as a mud fence, she admits. Waspy as hell an' locoed, too, I'll bet, judgin' by her letter."

Dunn, the old rider, said quietly, "Goin' to stick to that there story, hombre?"

"It's the truth." Wilk looked startled.

Dunn put his tongue in his cheek and rolled his eyes skyward. "Mebbe so, mebbe so. But—now keep your hair on! No offense is meant, an' none should be took. But girl trouble is no jokin' matter in these parts, 'specially when a gent's reputation's beginnin' to cloud up like yours is."

"What do you mean?"

Dunn drawled skeptically, "Case you don't know, I guess I'll have to tell you. Well, then, a couple of weeks ago whilst we was cleanin' up near Rawlins I drifted into said town an' met a gent who was inquirin' right anxious about you. Seems like he'd lent you a hundred dollars in September an' was gettin' right anxious. Said you'd left a flock of I. O. U.'s in town.

"Folks figured your job was good for the amounts. Mebbe so. But I'm tellin' you that if the Ol' Man finds out, an' he's in Rawlins this abidin' minute, what you've been doin' on the strength of your job— Well, said job won't be worth a busted cinch an' you'll have a hell of a time findin' another in these parts."

Wilk shook his head like a tormented bull. "What's comin' off here anyway? Girls—everybody knows I ride wide of 'em. I haven't been in Rawlins for a year. An' I don't owe a red cent to a livin' soul."

The Box Triangle M began to round up the bull herd the following morning, and Wilk threw himself ardently into the work. He'd forget Sunday's unpleasantness. It was only a far-fetched whizzer; only the outfit's showing their disapproval of him in this childish manner.

They were simply sore because he never joined them in their hell-raising

busts. They just couldn't sabe why he craved to nurse his job along so careful-like. Maybe if he'd told them how he felt, that life was a ladder and jobs were the rungs by which you climbed to the top; that slipping was painful, that falling was failure. . . . But hell, you couldn't tell 'em that. You kept such thoughts to yourself in the Seven Mile if you didn't want people to think you'd gone plumb locoed.

The Old Man returned to headquarters ranch on Tuesday. "Breathin' fire an' brimstone," Limpy Haze informed Wilk, "an' sorer'n a flock of boils. He wants you should burn the wind for the home place pronto. Hombre, is he fulminatin'? I seen him kick a couple of cats to hell-an'-gone again. The missis is drippin' tears all over the place. The Jess girl's locked in her room, yappin' like a coyote?

"When I climbed my horse to come for you, I sure felt like I was escapin' from a earthquake or mebbe a volcano. If jobs wasn't so scarce I'd keep on driftin'. As it is, it's goin' to take me plenty long to git back, hombre. I'm tellin' the world there's just a little too damn much row-de-dow for comfort on the ol' stompin' grounds."

The Old Man was sizzling with rage. His seamed thin face, on which forehead, nose and chin stood out like rocky crags, was darkly flushed. His small shrewd eyes were probes beneath gray bristling brows. Throughout the Seven Mile country McGraw was known as a powerful man to tie to, a terrible man to cross.

His gnarled hands gripped the edge of his desk in the ranch office as though he needed physical restraint as well as will power to remain seated.

"Set," he snarled at Wilk when the door closed behind the latter.

"I'll stand." The words forced themselves through Wilk's tight lips. His anger was mounting to match the Old Man's. Nerves and muscles grew tight and tighter. A jerking quiver went through them spasmodically. But his look was steady.

The end, huh? Just when he'd barely got his toe in the stirrup, so to speak; just when he was ready to mount above the struggle and hardships that had been his lot since the age of ten. Ambition, square-dealing and sweating toil had bought him only this—dismissal from the first worth while job he'd ever held. All on account of some unknown fool girl and a few groundless rumors. Why, hell, if that was all the sense the Old Man had he wasn't worth working for.

That amazing thought carried over to the spoken word. "You're not worth workin' for." His tone was cold, measured. "If you're lettin' go all holts because you've heard some gossip about me, you're no better'n a jittery ol' woman."

"The hell you say!" contributed McGraw.

"Correct." Wilk came to stand by the desk, quietly and assuredly—secretly amazed, too. How was he gettin' this way? Seemed like some strange force was movin' him, seein' through his eyes, speakin' with his voice. "This is no time for stallin', so I won't make out I don't know why I'm hazed in here. To get hell, huh? An' the air, too, mebbe?"

"You've kinda beat me to the draw on this, Farron, but you're through, all right. Partly my error, perhaps. I went against my better judgment, giving you this foreman job. Reckon I was kinda dazzled by the record you made for yourself down in Arizona. Investigation showed you had plenty brains and knew how to use 'em, honest-like.

"You sure looked like the new blood this spread needs. I saw the makings of a partner in you. Your youth, I thought, was your only handicap and time would remedy that. But I was wrong. You can't stand prosperity, so I'm kicking you out."

"Yes, you are!" Wilk's knuckles showed white as he leaned his weight against his clenched hands on the desk. "I won't be kicked, sabe? An' I won't quit till—"

"You—you—" the Old Man choked and began again. "You've been wasting my time in gambling and bootleg joints. You've borrowed money right and left; you've deceived girls; you've gone round bragging that you're going to marry my niece, Jessie."

"Don't kid yourself. I wouldn't touch her with a forty-foot rope. Get that fixed in your mind, McGraw. No slight on Miss Jess; she's just too rich for my blood. Marry any kin of yours? Gosh, I'd sooner go to jail." Wilk stopped abruptly, flushing. Wasn't he kind of quoting that stranger girl, Priscilla? Her sentiments must be contagious. If they spread, the Seven Mile jail would soon be full of reluctant girls and men. The thought was amusing. He grinned, but at the wrong moment.

The Old Man bounced out of his chair and shook his fist in his foreman's face. The words that accompanied the gesture opened Wilk's eyes, literally. What a top-hand at cussing the Old Man turned out to be!

"An' a damned good thing for you that you are an old man, McGraw. Said fact saves you from a punch in the head. Lay off, now, before you have a stroke."

The next few moments were something to forget as quickly as possible. Wilk emerged with one clear fact: this thing was not a practical joke; someone was seriously and successfully impersonating him. Over and over he stated that to the Old Man.

"It's no good," the latter declared. "Where's the sense to it? If a girl wasn't mixed up in it I'd say maybe so. But why should one man pretend to be another when he's making love, with honorable intentions? Look!"

He slapped his desk with an open letter. "This is from the Hale girl's father. He claims he's given you leave to marry the girl because him and his wife want to go back to Missouri and won't leave the kid here alone on her ranch. The place was left to her by an uncle, old Pliny Wiles, only on condition that she live on it and work it.

"Was her ranch your object in making a play for her? If so, what made you get cold feet? And why couldn't you just throw her like a gent should, 'stead of lying like a son of a gun about going to marry my Jess?

"Serve you right if I called your bluff there. Instead of which, I'm making you go back to Hale's and get forgiven, like the girl's father wants you should. And to be sure you carry out orders, I'm holding back the pay that's coming to you till you show me a marriage certificate. Damned if I turn you loose, single and fancy free. I'll make an honest man of you or bust."

Wilk was speechless. What was the use of trying to make the doddering Old Man believe he was guiltless? But maybe the sheriff wasn't so thick-skulled. Wilk stalked to the telephone on the wall and called the county building in Seven Mile. There wasn't much he could tell the officer that was helpful, and that little caused no excitement. But Wilk persisted and finally the sheriff indifferently asked for a description of the impostor.

Wilk rasped, "How'n time should *I* know what he looks like? Me, I guess, else he wouldn't be puttin' his racket over so well. Huh? . . . Say, don't ask me to tell you what I look like. I couldn't do justice to the subject...."

The sheriff was a cautious man; the wire buzzed and crackled with his questions. McGraw left his desk and paced the floor, hissing skeptically, "That bluff you're runnin' about being impersonated don't fool me none, Farron. It won't go down. You're just trying to crawl out of marrying that Priscilla girl. I won't have it."

Wilk felt like a trapped dumb brute, goaded from all sides. His eyes blazed fury at the Old Man. He cut the sheriff's wary questions short, snapping, "Listen, hombre, all you got to do's arrest an' hold anyone claimin' to be Wilk Farron. If you dasn't do that on suspicion, you'd best resign."

He slammed the receiver on its hook and wheeled to face the Old Man, "Bluff, huh? Callin' me? Then read this an' weep." His hand flashed to his shirt pocket, where he kept Priscilla's letter, and came away empty. Somehow he couldn't let McGraw's hard skeptical eyes see what the girl had written, not even that part containing the brazen admission of her uncalled for lie about Jess McGraw.

For beneath his anger, beneath the smart of the injustice that was being done to him, grew a feeling of sympathy for Priscilla. Maybe she was being prodded as relentlessly as he was. Maybe if he got to know her he would learn that she wasn't the waspy little wretch she seemed to be. Maybe she wasn't quite as homely as a mud fence, either. He'd kinda like to find out for himself. . . .

His head went up with a jerk. His mouth tightened. Was he going soft at this stage of the game? Was he forgetting that his whole world was against him, his reputation tottering, his job a thing of the past?

"Farron," the Old Man said, a new note in his voice, "show me! Prove that I've misjudged you and I'll give you another fling at this job."

"No foolin'?" Hope relaxed the strain that gripped Wilk. He was still on a high rung of the ladder, then, though his hold had loosened a trifle. "No foolin'?"

"No. This is straight. Clear yourself on that Rawlins thing, marry the girl—"

"Huh! I thought you'd welch. Now you listen to me, you ol' goat. There's not a job good enough, there's not a ranch big enough to haze me into the matrimonial corral, if you get what I mean. As for clearin' myself of the Rawlins thing, why say, hombre, I'll do that pronto and make you look so foolish you'll—"

The door swung in. Jess McGraw stood in the opening as a picture within its frame—a lovely picture, if a man cared for opulent curves, meltingly dark eyes and overripe lips. The eyes were chilly now as they briefly grazed McGraw, but they warmed sparklingly as they met Wilk's.

Jess cooed, "You rascal! Pretending to be all indifferent and everything, when all the time you were eating out your poor heart for me, telling folks on the sly you were going to marry me. Oh, dear, it's just too romantic."

Wilk made a choking sound. McGraw yelped, "Git back to your room, girl!" Jess shrugged plump shoulders and came to stand by Wilk. She wagged an admonishing forefinger. "I should punish you, you naughty boy, and do like Uncle says. But I won't. This is pretty sudden, but I'm willing to overlook that. Anything, so's I can save you from that designing hussy, Priscilla Hale. We'll just—"

Wilk fled away from the house, through the dooryard, past the barns and the horse corral. The cook's flivver was in an abandoned shed. He'd borrow it, though what the cook might do in retaliation wouldn't bear thinking of. But a car was necessary. Wilk knew he'd kill a horse, pushing on to the old Wiles ranch, sixty-odd miles distant, lashed as he was by this maddening urgency.

For he had to get there at once. He had to haze that girl and her silly old father to the Box Triangle M. Make 'em prove to the Old Man that he, Wilk, was a stranger to them. Compel Priscilla to acknowledge that she had lied about him and Jess. That sure enough should clear the Old Man's addled brain. But how about Jess, so willing to be big-hearted? Wilk shuddered.

The sun was noon high. Peace enfolded the upland valley. The road wound emptily before him, climbing hills, skirting creeks, crossing fenced range. There were barbed wire gates with dragging posts to be opened and closed. There were miles and endless miles of space that seemed to reach, as an ever rising barrier, between him and his objective, that seemed to

clutch with vindictive hands at the decrepit car.

The sun was sliding toward the snow-capped western peaks by the time the town of Seven Mile was reached. The car needed gas. Wilk stopped at the rambling frame building, next to Two Card Whitey's place, which functioned as a livery barn and filling station.

He said, getting out to stretch the cramp from his long legs, "Fill 'er up and look at the oil. Say, what's the quickest way to the ol' Wiles ranch from here?"

Two men, who had not the appearance of cowhands, for all their rough clothes and weather-beaten faces, sauntered toward him.

One drawled, "What's the big rush for the Wiles ranch, stranger?" Though his tone was indifferent, his eyes were sharp and suspicious.

Wilk felt the hair rise on the back of his neck. Was everybody in the Seven Mile country determined to horn into his business? He'd sure like to take a poke at these two tough gents, just on principle, but that needed time, and he had none to spare.

He'd best pay for the gas and be on his way. "What do I owe you?" he addressed the man at the pump, then stopped. His right-hand pocket was empty. He searched the rest, failing to find any money. He laughed embarrassedly. "Reckon you'll have to trust me, hombre. I'm Wilk Farron of the Box Triangle M."

The hard-faced strangers exhanged a look and chorused, "He's lying. Wilk Farron's at the Wiles ranch. We know."

The filling station keeper peered at the car's license plates, then shouted at a group of men, idling in the doorway of Two Card Whitey's place. "Haze the sheriff outa there, gents. Here's the car reported stolen from the Box Triangle M an' a galoot that's tryin' to gyp me outa gas."

Wilk began, "You locoed fool," but checked his words as, from the tail of his eye, he saw the two strangers about to close in on him. He whirled to face them, head low. All the stinging fury of the past few days found expression in the vicious blows he dealt—fair and foul . . . anything . . . anyhow. Get clear of this. Get to the Wiles ranch. But he was hit—hit hard.

Crunching bone met hard flesh. Blurred faces wavered in the haze before his eyes. One of his own was closing, and his ears throbbed with the sound of grunted curses, pounding boot heels, muffled yells.

Confusion and bedlam! Through it all there came again the feeling of being charged with some strange force, directing him, moving him. It was a force that sent him leaping to the car, that sent the car growling and jerking in reverse through the wide doorway into the dusty street, only to be met by the cautious sheriff's bellowing, "Halt!"

Wilk obeyed, stretching a long arm to open the off-side door. "Just the gent I crave. Step right in."

The sheriff advanced a wary step. His heavy face, expressionless as a board, adorned with a small red mustache and blue guarded eyes, lifted to Wilk, "What's all this?"

"A li'l' misunderstandin'. Haven't time to explain. Get in, Sheriff."

"Get out. This here's a stolen car."

"Borrowed. Look, would anybody steal this can? Quit foolin'. Come with me an' I'll tell you the sad story as we roll along. It's like this. I'm Wilk Farron an'—"

"O-ho!" a gleam of interest came into the guarded eyes. Caution deserted the sheriff for the moment. He put a foot on the running board, leaned on the sagging door. "Wilk Farron, huh? Seems like these parts are gettin' plumb infested with Wilk Farrons. I've orders to gather you in."

"But I'm not the gent, hombre," Wilk protested hotly. "I mean, I'm the gent, all right, but not the one you take me for. I'm the one who phoned you to gather in the other one, which

I just found out is at the Wiles ranch. So if you get in I'll drive you out an' you can take him in."

The sheriff's jaw was sagging, his hand was pawing weakly at his holster. He thinks I'm locoed, Wilk guessed swiftly. Mebbe so. But I'm sure as hell not goin' to be roped before I finish this. The street was beginning to clot with men; doors were opening farther along. The car's idling engine was coughing violently.

The next moment the cautious sheriff was viewing the sky from the flat of his back in the street's thick dust, that was being churned to a dense cloud by the excited wearers of high-heeled cow boots. Popping guns gave general alarm; hoarse shouts sounded the call to battle. And over the ridge at the town's far end a rackety flivver —with Wilk hunched low above the steering wheel—flipped its tail light.

Dusk was thickening, but there was still light enough to see the dreary dilapidation of the buildings on the old Wiles ranch, ten miles south of Seven Mile. There was one lamp-yellowed window in what Wilk supposed to be the kitchen. He was not to reach it at once, however, for from the left of the lane, in a little wooded gully, came the full-throated note of a hound.

Wilk stilled the throb and rattle of the flivver, the better to hear. Human voices mingled with the dog's clamor.

A man's voice whined, "Call off your damn cur. Lemme down from this tree!"

Then came a girl's cool reply, "When I get good and ready, Mr. Wilk Farron. When *you* get ready to tell the truth. Now, once again, why are you so anxious. . . ."

Wilk vaulted over the flivver's door and went stumbling and slipping down the gully's side. A slim, slight girl swung a shotgun to her shoulder and said crisply, "Stop!"

Then a young man in a spruce tree yelled, "Help!" while the hound's clamor rose deafeningly.

Wilk shouted at all three, "Dry up! An' you, ma'am, quit drawin' circles in the air with that gun muzzle. I'm gettin' dizzy. You're Priscilla Hale, I reckon?"

The girl nodded. Her black-fringed gray eyes asked the question her disdainful lips would not frame. Though a posse might overtake him any moment, though the treed man was calling down curses on him, though the hound was growling and bristling, Wilk gave the girl a deliberate weighing stare. He liked the tilt of her chin, the gallant way she carried her head. He liked the cool directness with which she returned his stare.

"I'll bet a month's pay you're a regular feller," he declared warmly in the first flush of discovery. Then recollection poured over him like a black flood. His jaw tightened. "But you've sure enough played hell with me. Look at me! Look hard! Never saw me before, did you?"

Priscilla admitted that. "And if I never see you again, I guess I can stand it. Go away. Can't you see I'm busy?"

She lowered the shotgun and waved him aside, to call to the other man, "Now you up there, get this—I'm saying *no*. I've said it and said it, I've written it in a letter—"

"Which same *I* got, ma'am," Wilk cut in, "at the ranch where I had a job till you an' your father an' this treed polecat— Shut up, both of you! Gimme that gun!" He snatched it from her reluctant hands. "Hold your hound if you don't want him shot. . . . Now you, hombre, tumble outa that tree—*muy pronto*. Get along to the house. We'll soon clear up this mess."

He prodded the protesting man before him up the steep lane. The girl, with the rumbling dog at her heels, kept pace silently, eyes straight ahead, chin up. But once, when Wilk's keen ears caught the labored grind of a car coming up a long grade nearby, he turned his head to listen and met Priscilla's questioning look.

Five minutes later, in the brightly lighted ranch kitchen, Wilk ranged himself beside the captured man. "Take a good look, you all," he said to the girl and her parents. "Insult me if necessary, but tell me the truth. Is this jasper my double?"

"There's a resemblance," the girl conceded. "I can see that some might take him for you, same as folks who did not know any better might mistake a counterfeit coin for the real thing. But I—I knew there was something wrong about him. I felt it in my bones."

"Yet you must've let him make love to you."

"I did not!" Priscilla's stormy eyes darkened. Her cheeks flamed. "Not that it's any of your business!"

"Correct!" Wilk agreed hotly. "Which fact suits me clear down to the ground." But, gosh, she sure was easy to look at when she lighted up that way. An' she sure did have stuff. None of the languishin', you-naughty-boy Jess stuff . . . just plain gingery spunk. If a man could dab a loop on a girl like this, gentle her a mite. . . .

"Open up in there!" A fist pounded on the outer door, while heels scraped and spurs jingled on the stoop. The cautious sheriff with a considerable posse, to judge by the sound, had arrived. Another instant and the door was flung open.

The law, including the two strangers who had been loitering in the Seven Mile filling station and on whom the sheriff now loudly called to identify Wilk Farron, poured in. Then noise and confusion filled the small kitchen. After a moment a hush fell, and Priscilla spoke.

"But you can't arrest a man because some crook impersonates him, Mr. Sheriff."

"Who're you to tell me what I can an' can't do, ma'am? An' which is the crook an' which ain't? Me, I take no chances. All I know is that this here 'un"—he jabbed Wilk's chest with a stubby forefinger—"drove a stolen car, gypped a filling station an' resisted arrest. So come along with me, young feller."

"You'll have to take me, too," Priscilla declared. Wilk's heart gave a quick leap. What a girl, oh, what a girl! "Because," her cool voice went on, "I'm afraid you'll overlook a few bets. You see, all this ties up with me and my ranch, somehow, and—"

"An' with them two gents there," the impostor broke in, snarling at the two roughly clad strangers. "They're the brains of this here scheme. Brains, hell! Claim they're geologists, prospectin' on the quiet for a big oil company. Claim this here Seven Mile'll make the Salt Creek look sick.

"They're the ones which showed me it'd be easier to marry this girl an' her ranch than to fool around an' put everybody wise to the possibilities of the land by tryin' to buy outright or get an option. They steered me to her after a test well came in big over yonder. They said they'd split fifty-fifty—"

"Lies," one of the strangers grinned too thinly at the sheriff. "He's makin' this up outa whole cloth, hombre."

"Like hell I am!"

"What I crave to know," Wilk put in, "is why'n time you made fresh with *my* name, feller. Why pick on me?"

"Shucks, hombre," the other whined, "that was just accident. Last summer some gent in Rawlins—in which town I happened to light on my way to nowheres in particular—mistook me for you, him bein' some liquored up. Bought me a couple of drinks an' made me acquainted with a bunch of other fellers who admitted they'd heard of Wilk Farron plenty. But they hadn't met before on account of same mindin' his own business so intense-like.

"These hombres"—he jerked his head toward the strangers—"was with that bunch. They cottoned to me right off, sayin' I must be a brainy gent to've got made foreman at my age. It

puffed me up some to have folks treat me thataway. I saw no harm in profitin' by lookin' like the foreman of a big outfit for a while—fakin' it bein' the nearest I'd ever get to a job like that, I knowed.

"But by the time these polecats sprung their scheme on me about this girl an' all, they had me roped right. I couldn't get away nohow, without gettin' into worse trouble. They sure had me pegged proper. But they was gettin' worried an' they crowded me somethin' awful today. So I come out here to try to talk the girl into my way of thinkin'. What does she do but run me off'n the place with a shotgun an' a hound dog."

The sheriff nodded to his possemen. They herded the counterfeit Farron and his two confederates out of the kitchen. Then the officer clapped his hand on Wilk's shoulder. "You, too, young feller. No one can smack me down an' not pay for it. Hustle!"

"Wait, please," Priscilla begged. "Wilk Farron, did you really mean what you said about losing your job on my account? I—I'm plumb sorry. Could I do anything to—to sort of square you with your boss?"

Wilk grinned. "You'd be surprised!" His look lingered speculatively on her. Would she flare up, thinking he was making a play for her possibly rich ranch, if he told her the condition the Old Man had made? No, that was out, even if he was beginning to feel that the Old Man's terms would not be so hard to take—eventually. "Thanks, ma'am, but I reckon it'd be a waste of time," he said finally.

"But what are you going to do?"

"Goin' to jail, I reckon. You"—his grin broke out once more—"should come along, too, just to see what it's like. Make sure that you'd prefer it or the Chinese laundryman to me."

Priscilla tossed her head. "You know now I didn't mean you when I wrote that." Stars lighted themselves in her eyes, her lips curved in a tremulous smile. "I guess I sound as bold as can be, but I don't care. I bet if you *had* been Wilk Farron—I mean if he hadn't been you— Oh, you know what I mean."

"I wonder"—Wilk stepped toward her and looked deep into her eyes—"if I do."

"Haw-hum!" Her father cleared his throat noisily. "I've been a-thinkin', Mister. We Hales owe you somethin' an' if so we can make amends, we'd like to. Besides, you'd be doin' me a personal favor.

"What I mean, if there *is* oil in this here land, I'd like the help of someone who knows the country to kinda steer me clear of sharpers. An' if there ain't oil, I sure as shootin' need the help of a cowman to show me how to raise cows. Danged if I'll go it alone after all this here row-de-dow. I just can't cope with it."

"Will you get goin'?" the sheriff rasped.

"I—I guess you'd better," Priscilla laughed shakily, "before Dad tries harder to rope you. If they allow visitors, I'll see you in jail."

"Is that a promise?" Wilk felt suddenly that the world and all hung on her answer.

Her eyes met his, straight and clear. "A promise, hombre, a sure-enough promise," was Priscilla's reply. . . .

"An' ride me on a rail," recounted the sheriff to his cronies in Two Card Whitey's place the next day, "if it didn't sound like he was a-wooin' her an' she was willin'. But does he up an' kiss her right smack on the mouth? No, sir. An' does she look like she craves to have him do same? Not that I could notice. But you can't tell about young folks nowadays.

"When ol' McGraw come bustin' into town this mornin' to put up bail for Wilk, he says, 'Hale talked to me on the phone last night. Guess I was plumb hasty. Your job's waitin' for you an' you won't have to get married after all.'

"'Says you?' snaps this Wilk. 'Try an' stop me, you ol' goat. Just try!'"

# Girl of the Rio Grande

By Clee Woods

**Once again the historic old Rio Grande was on the rampage, seething and turbulent. And when lovely Torchy Malone was caught in that awful vortex of angry water, a valiant cowboy met the supreme test of courage in his effort to bring the range girl to safety.**

THE rain continued to fall steadily. Occasionally a dissatisfied steer would throw its head up and shake it ill-temperedly. The whole Dotted Links herd wanted to drift, but a double guard held them.

The rest of the cowboys stood in a half circle just outside a little tepee tent, most of them clad in long, black slickers. The boss was in the tent, shoulder cracked by a pile-up with his horse. His daughter, "Torchy" Malone, was doing what she could for him while somebody went for a doctor. The faces of the seven men outside the tent were as ominous as the skies overhead. Torchy stepped outside the tent and looked anxiously at the worried men.

She was only a little "half-pint" cowgirl in size. Her very fair skin was hardly the kind to tan much by outdoor life. But small freckles were sprinkled lightly over the pretty face that stood out radiantly below a brown Stetson, even on a drab day like this. Her dark eyes were softened by a warm, reddish tinge.

"Dad says," she began to the assembled riders, "that we've got to go ahead and get the cattle there."

"We all figured, Torchy," replied Jupe Martin, a begrizzled old cowhand, "that it was loco for the old man

to try to push 'em to the river and then across, him along to boss the job. But with him laid out, it cain't be done."

"It can't be done!" the girl flashed back. "Boys, are you getting soft-livered on us at a time like this?"

The men hung their heads. Jupe offered further arguments against the rash attempt to deliver the twelve hundred head of cattle across the swollen Rio Grande, up where it bisects Sierra County, New Mexico. The river was eighteen miles away, with a low range and a flooded creek between it and this herd.

While Jupe Martin still offered time-proved reasons why they could never make it, two more men came riding toward them. The first to reach them was Hort Crowe, a rider already in the thirties. He was a tall, well built man, and would have been very handsome had it not been for a flat, dished nose and a whitish roll to his big, gray eyes.

"Well," he called out with great enthusiasm, "why don't we get the herd to movin'? We got to make it across that river before dark tomorrow."

"There you are!" Torchy cried to the unwilling men. "Hort is sport enough to try it, even when he stands to lose a fortune if we make it."

"Sure," Crowe added, pushing his horse up close to the girl, "and why couldn't I—for you?"

He bent outward from the saddle and patted Torchy on the shoulder. She shrugged away from his hand a bit, even when he was backing her plea to the men. The other rider drawing near was Ty Goodnight, a Texas cowboy and a comparatively newcomer. Goodnight frowned to see Crowe's unwelcome familiarity toward the girl.

Goodnight was young and only of average height and build. His long, slender face, with its high, thin nose and black, arched eyebrows, gave the impression of a colonial gentleman. But he was all cowboy, from the old gray Stetson, whose brims curled up at the sides and came to a peak in front, down to the thick, brush-battered chaparejos which flopped wet above his hog-snout taps. He was not handsome. But there was character in his tanned face and quiet manner and a certain confidence in his deliberate movements.

"And you're with us, too, aren't you, Ty?" Torchy asked, as he pulled up without a word.

"The odds are liable to be sorter heavy, weather and all considered," he replied.

He gave the man Crowe only the slightest of glances with his eyes, without turning his head at all. Crowe seemed to catch the significance of the remark, however.

"There's nothing but the floods," he snapped.

Here was a very strange situation. Torchy's father had had no end of trouble with Sherm and Luther Crowe, brothers of Hort. In desperation, he finally had taken an option to buy the neighboring ranch of the three Crowe brothers for twenty-eight thousand dollars, a strong price. The deal had got no further than the option because Malone, already in debt, had to try to borrow the money that was to rid him of the undesirable neighbors.

Shortly after the option was signed, however, high-grade copper was discovered in the rough canyon just above the two open sections of patented land the Crowes were selling. A big copper company wanted these sections for a mill and town site. It was negotiating with Malone for the patented land alone for fifty thousand dollars.

Sherm and Luther Crowe at first had boasted privately of "stinging" old man Malone with a water-shy ranch. But when the news of the copper development broke, their chuckles turned to thwarted greed. It was rumored that they had offered the land to the company much under fifty

thousand dollars if the company would help them block Malone in taking up his option. The company officials would have been above this. But a shyster lawyer was handling their interests. This secret teamwork might have been responsible for the fact that Malone found it impossible to borrow the money to close the deal.

He therefore had been compelled to strip his own ranch to raise the money. But he had been so limited in time that he barely had been able to gather enough cattle to net the twenty-eight thousand dollars. Worse still, he had agreed to deliver the cattle to the shipping pens across the Rio Grande. Now he had only this day and the next in which to trail the stock eighteen miles, cross the river and get back with the money before the option expired.

Hort Crowe apparently had tried to stop the scheming tricks of his brothers, Sherm and Luther. The knowing ones said that Hort wanted to reap a richer profit himself by marrying the rancher's only child. For this reason, all through the round-up they had kept urging young Goodnight to break up Hort Crowe's secret ambitions.

"Shine up to 'er, kid," Jupe Martin had urged him, "and cut out that lousy devil afore he marries in over us and ruins that little gal's life to boot."

If Goodnight was in love with Torchy, nobody knew it. The girl had shown some liking for him. But the ardent wooing of Hort Crowe had seemed to dim her original interest in the young man from Texas. Crowe could make himself likable. And now his apparent willingness to sacrifice profit for himself and his brothers seemed to appeal to Torchy's youthful admiration for sportsmanship.

"Men," Crowe was taunting the Dotted Link riders, "come on, snap to it and let's get 'em to rollin'."

Not a man moved. They cast sullen, aggravated glances from Crowe to Torchy, then on to the thin face of Ty Goodnight. The young Texan never moved a muscle. Crowe turned on him in bold confidence.

"What do *you* say, Goodnight?" he demanded. "The drive is startin' anyway, if only me and Torchy have to try it by ourselves."

Crowe dropped from the saddle dramatically and planted himself beside the girl. It was a challenge the Dotted Links men would not let pass. Everyone looked to Goodnight. Still the young cowboy refused to open hostilities against Crowe. But Jupe Martin did, by rubbing the white-sprinkled stubs of his beard and demanding of Torchy, "Who's goin' to boss the drive if we throw on for it?"

Torchy Malone realized that moment just what she was up against. Not to get the cattle across the Rio Grande by the following night meant the loss to her father of at least forty thousand dollars. More than that, it would be the beginning of his utter ruin, for he had gone further in debt to make this hasty round-up. Worse still, on such a hazardous trail they might lose great numbers of cattle in the flood waters.

Torchy knew that Crowe fully expected to boss the drive. Yet she could see that the men were not willing to follow him. Right here was where the little red-headed cowgirl showed her pioneer blood.

"I'm going to boss the drive, boys," she answered the direct question. "If there's a man of you that doesn't like it, let him speak up right now for his pay!"

"You're the beatenest little cuss that ever forked leather," Jupe Martin growled. "But we're with you, kid!"

"But I can't leave Dad until the doctor gets here," she added, "so until I catch up with you, Ty will run the outfit!"

Crowe looked at Torchy as though he could not believe she meant it. However, the Dotted Links riders showed their pleasure at the choice.

Every man of them was much older than Ty Goodnight. But Goodnight knew cows and cow trails. What was more, he held the respect of his stirrup mates. He turned off now without question or debate. The men hurried after him.

"Say," Crowe objected to Torchy, when they were left alone, "that upstart ain't got no savvy of trailin' in weather like this. He's from the Texas plains."

"No, the Pecos," she corrected. "And he's got gumption."

"Then," Crowe demanded angrily, "you're turnin' me down, after all I've done for you?"

Torchy's dark eyes flashed their warning. Crowe hastened to make amends for his unwise anger.

"Excuse me," he begged, in that contrite way he could assume so hypocritically. "Torchy, I'm wild about you and I'd stick by you in a pinch like this, even if you had a spick for a foreman."

He swung back to his horse and galloped after the other cowboys. Torchy went back into the tent. Her father was suffering considerable pain. But the auburn-haired old man forgot it to say, "Torchy, I don't think my horse stumbled. It felt funny to me, the way he went down."

Torchy asked no questions. She called the cook to stay with the patient temporarily, and went up through the rain to where one of the cowboys had destroyed her father's horse, after it was found to have a broken leg. In this instance, Torchy took nothing for granted, and she made a startling discovery. The horse's leg had been struck by a bullet!

For a long time she stood there in the rain, thinking. On her right were cedars, cholla and rocks. A man could have been hiding there when her time-harassed father came galloping back from the camp to the herd. Thunder and rain could have drowned the report of a six-gun. It seemed highly improbable that at such close range the man in ambush could have aimed at her father and missed wide enough to strike the horse's leg. Therefore, he must have intended the fall of the crippled horse to take fighting old John B. Malone out of the race to cross the Rio Grande.

Torchy examined the ground back of the rocks and cedars. The rain had nearly washed out the tracks of a horse. There was no other clue. But the girl naturally thought of Sherm and Luther Crowe. They were not beyond a thing like this. Back there in the bottom she could see the cowboys moving into the milling herd and pushing some cattle out to the lead. Then they fed more cattle into the lane of red bodies and white faces.

Torchy galloped down to lend a hand in pushing the herd along. But, with every splashing, rain-soaked mile, a feeling of helplessness grew within her. She must ask somebody's help in guarding the herd from this hidden menace. Crowe changed that desire quickly when he joined her behind the drags.

"Listen, little one," he cautioned, bending toward her, "I'm afraid you'll hate me for it, but I think too much of you not to tell this. And it's unbelievable almost. But Ty Goodnight is hand in glove with them copper magnates!"

"Then," Torchy snapped, "you've got to tell Goodnight that to his face!"

Crowe began to crawfish immediately. Torchy was too angry to accept any excuse. She wanted a showdown.

"Come on," she finally ruled, heading for the lead, "or I'm going to send Goodnight back after you."

"All right," he agreed grudgingly, "but it upsets all my plans to catch Goodnight red-handed."

Torchy led the way up to where Goodnight was riding the left point. She motioned the cowboy aside. Jupe Martin seemed to sense trouble and

rode over while Crowe was pulling up.

"Now say that again," Torchy invited Crowe.

Crowe got down from his horse. He had the air now of a man sure of himself, except for a faint suggestion of fear in his rolling eyes. He threw back the right side of his slicker, to uncover the butt of his forty-five.

"I said," he began, eyeing Goodnight belligerently, "that an hombre by the name of Goodnight is a paid agent of that shyster lawyer workin' for the copper company."

Goodnight slid from his horse. Deliberately, he threw aside his own slicker. Crowe was two inches taller than Goodnight, and much heavier. He made a savage rush at Goodnight, both fists flying. Goodnight stopped him with a hard left jab. Crowe immediately circled about until he had Goodnight between him and the heels of his own black horse, then he rushed again.

This time he seemed more intent on warding off Goodnight's blows than hitting him. But in reality he was pushing the lighter cowboy backwards. Before Goodnight realized what the man's cowardly intent was, Crowe had him bumping into the legs and tail of the black horse.

Instantly, the ill-tempered horse pinned back its ears and shot its white-stockinged hind feet out. Goodnight was too close for the flying heels to do him much harm on the first kick. But he was knocked down. The hoofs drove backwards again as he fell. This time one hoof caught him beside the head. His face hit into the mud, and remained there. Crowe, seeing the success of his crafty ruse, began yelling and fighting frantically at the horse, to refute any suspicion that he might have known what the horse would do.

When it swung away, Crowe got down by Goodnight's limp body and placed an ear to his heart. He seemed to have difficulty in determining whether or not the heart was beating. While he hovered there, his black slicker was spread out like a hen's wing to cover most of Goodnight's breast. Under its perfect screen, Crowe slipped a piece of paper into the unconscious man's breast pocket.

"See if you can make out any heartbeat," he then said to Torchy.

Torchy's face was blanched. She dropped down over Goodnight, then her fear subsided somewhat.

"Sure, I hear it," she declared joyfully. "Let's bring him to. His hat saved his skull from being cracked."

She began chafing the cowboy's wrists. Crowe helped her from the other side. More cowboys were gathering around. Just a small corner of a piece of paper showed from Goodnight's shirt pocket.

"Seein' that he's under suspicion," Crowe said to the girl, "let's have a look at that paper."

Crowe plucked the paper out and glanced at it. Then he handed it to Torchy. She immediately recognized Sherm Crowe's handwriting. The note read:

> Meet you at the old Hemmingway shack at two if any more trouble needed, sabe? We are watching.
>
> Sherm.

Crowe had his head bowed, as if in deep shame. "My own brothers," he murmured bitterly.

"Throw Goodnight into the wagon," Torchy said in dull, stunned voice, "and watch him if he comes to."

"And me," Crowe volunteered wretchedly, "I guess you'll want to tie me up, too, seein' that my brothers are at their dirty work."

Crowe crossed his hands behind him and turned them to one of the cowboys. Torchy was moved by his crushed attitude. Even the cowboys looked sorry for him.

"No," the girl ruled, "you're not going to be tied up, Hort. You stay and help us get these cattle on down the trail."

Some of the cowboys frowned at that. Old Jupe Martin came up and took the note from Torchy's trembling hands. He scanned it a moment, then put it back into the cowboy's pocket.

"You're a mite hasty, lass," he told Torchy. "If Goodnight is in with Sherm and Luther Crowe, let 'im meet 'em at the shack. I'll be there, too, though, and—"

"That's a grand idea, Jupe," Torchy cut in, "but I'll be there instead of you. You stay with Goodnight till he comes to. Then tell him that the herd will be across the river ahead of time. That'll make him want to hold a confab with his brush-ridin' pards!"

Torchy bit out the last words. Giving the muddy, unconscious Goodnight a scornful glance, she swung back to her saddle. As they pushed the cattle along, she tried to drive away the sick, dead feeling that crowded into her heart. Why should she care? Yet she felt strangely miserable, even as she planned to catch Goodnight there at the shack and confront him with his conspirators.

For two hours she helped whoop and whack the lagging animals in the steady push through the slow drizzle of rain. Then she turned off and rode alone to the Hemmingway shack. She left her horse in some bushes at a safe distance and then waited in a clump of yucca near a cracked wall of the abandoned 'dobe house. The continued downpour of rain added to the chill in her heart.

A sharp little pang shot through her breast when she saw Ty Goodnight come stealing down a wash afoot. This to her was absolute proof of his guilt. Goodnight, instead of going on to the house, took up a careful watch from the wash. Torchy was not the kind to wait. She stole up behind him, gun in hand, until he whirled his head and saw her. Then she swung her gun up onto him.

"So you thought more trouble for the herd was needed?" she taunted.

"Torchy, don't be plumb loco," he retorted. "Crowe put that note in my pocket. He must be workin' secret with his brothers. I'll bet he is waitin' around here somewhere now, to head them off from a run-in with me."

"If he is," she replied coldly, "it can be proved. Let's take a circle and find out. But you give me that gun and keep the lead."

For a moment their eyes met. Torchy almost weakened when she saw sincere anger and not guilt in his frank gaze.

"All right," he accepted her challenge, turning so she could take his gun.

Keeping under cover of brush, washes and hills, they made a full circle about the place. But the tracks of their own two horses were the only recent ones. They got their mounts and made a wider circle. To Torchy's further surprise and dismay, they ran onto the three Crowe brothers riding toward them. But Hort was behind his brothers with drawn gun. He forced the disarmed brothers to ride straight for them.

"Now spit it out," he told them when Torchy pulled up before them.

Luther and Sherm Crowe looked sullen and did not speak. "Come on, talk!" Hort ordered again.

Still the brothers did not make any confession. But Luther gave Goodnight a sheepish glance and said, "You tell it."

"Tell what?" Goodnight asked in puzzled voice.

"About us bein' in cahoots with you," Sherm blurted out.

Torchy's heart sank deeper. This was the final proof. Goodnight was turning to her, his face pale and eyes blazing.

"It's all a dirty frame-up!" he vowed.

"You try to tell me that," Torchy flung back, "after all the proof I've had? I don't know of any law to punish you—except the law the range sometimes has to use. Now get goin',

hombre, and don't even let your horse get tired!"

She pointed a finger to the outtrail. Goodnight merely pushed his horse up until he could lean forward and seize her hand.

"Listen, girl," he said in a voice so low and tense the others could not hear through the rain, "I'm stayin' to help put the cattle across. You can't run me off. Nor keep me from —from lovin' you! That's what I do, girl, and desperate."

He pulled his gun from its temporary place in her waistband and twisted his horse about as if to be off. Then he faced the three Crowe brothers.

"Hombres," he said slowly to them, "this fake goody-goodiness of Hort Crowe don't go a-tall! There's no way to keep me from fightin' them cattle on, except to kill me. I'll expect you to have that in mind the next time you ride in shootin' range of me before the herd crosses the Rio Grande. Sabe, hombres?"

Right at that moment Torchy believed in Ty Goodnight, in spite of all appearances against him. But when he had trotted away and Hort Crowe laughed jeeringly into her face, she thought she had been a fool for allowing him to go. Crowe told her so, too.

Then he turned on his brothers with the scathing words, "You two sneaks vamoose with him. But remember, brothers or no brothers, I'll stand for no more crooked work from you!"

Sherm and Luther made off in sheepish retreat. Torchy nosed her horse off for the herd. Crowe started to follow.

"Goodnight meant what he said," the girl warned him. "You better stay away."

"Never, as long as you need me!" Crowe vowed.

He roweled his horse up close beside her and tried to thrust an arm about her waist. Torchy swerved her horse to avoid his arm.

"Girl, I'm wild about you," he vowed. "I'll prove it to you, too."

"That's fair enough," Torchy returned, riding on. "But watch out for Ty."

The man's fervid avowal moved Torchy to a kindlier feeling toward him. Yet somehow she was not fully prepared to accept him for all he claimed to be. She urged her horse into a gallop and left him behind.

When she got back to the trailing cattle, she found Goodnight hard at the task of pushing the drive. Cowboys whooped and yipped, beat on their soggy chaps and flailed double ropes. Torchy herself rode ahead to pick the spot for crossing Tarantula Creek, a troublesome stream. When she came back and told Goodnight that they would ford the creek directly ahead, he shook his head.

"It's smooth enough water there," he overruled her, "but there's not downward distance to allow for the drift. I'm pushin' 'em down the north bank till we hit the old smelter bottom. Longer stretch of wide, smooth water there."

"We're crossing straight ahead here," Torchy snapped.

"Not this time," he smiled back, but the smile was mighty cold. "Deliverin' these cattle is my way of clearin' up things, and I'm boss till the buyer tallies 'em out."

Torchy was so angry she could have slapped him in the face for his audacity. But she did not deign to so much as answer him. Instead, she galloped over to old Jupe and told him to keep the leaders pushing straight on to the creek. Goodnight rode up behind her and let her finish. Then he said:

"Better make it the smelter bottom, Jupe."

"No, straight ahead," Torchy repeated belligerently. "Those are final orders, Jupe."

"All right, and here's my final orders," Goodnight retorted.

He shot his horse up beside hers and hooked an arm about her waist. Torchy was amazed at the steel-like

grip of that arm. Nevertheless, she fought to tear loose from its clutch. He swept her from her own saddle and deposited her roughly in front of him. His horse plunged away and she kicked and clawed. He managed to hold onto her, however, and subdue one of her scratching hands.

"Keep 'em movin', Jupe," he called back over his shoulder, "for the smelter bottom. I'll be back pronto."

He took a still more secure hold on her and headed his horse back the way they had come. Torchy gave up only after he had squeezed her into submission by sheer force.

"The men won't dare disobey me," she then informed him.

"Reckon not?" he drawled easily. "I'd hate to shoot somebody to make 'em mind me."

"You wouldn't dare do that!" she flared back.

"No?" he grinned aggravatingly.

Torchy settled into a sullen silence, while Goodnight kept on riding the backward trail for another three miles. Then he dropped her unceremoniously to the ground, saying, "By the time you hoof it up to us, you'll be willin' to let me boss you as well as the outfit."

"I'll come nearer shooting you!" she cried after him.

But he was clawing his horse into a gallop and refused to look back. Torchy shook an enraged little fist after him. Her eyes were blazing black. She began splashing through the rain and mud. She'd show him!

But tiny, high-heeled cowgirl boots are never easy to walk in, much less to run in over rain-soaked ground. She slowed down gradually until her gait became a dreary trudge. She went first to where she had told Jupe to cross the creek. But the cattle had not been forded there. By the time she reached the smelter bottom, the animals had crossed, and even the drags were out of sight. The punchers had not so much as left her a horse on this side.

With the fire once more flaming in her breast, she dragged an old dead cedar to the head of the smooth stretch of water, flung it in and flattened out on it. It was a foolhardy thing to do when she could not swim. But by the dead tree's aid, she pulled across before the strong current carried her down into the rapids. Bedraggled and foot-weary, she resumed the chase. Goodnight was just throwing the cattle up into a close rincon for the night when she came up with them. She summoned the cowboys together. They would have a showdown here and now.

But Ty Goodnight came up to her before she started in with her harangue. "It's pretty tough," he said simply, "to be denied a chance to prove you're not a rogue. And it's still tougher when you want to prove it to—to a girl like Torchy Malone."

His eyes were boring earnestly into hers. Torchy felt mean; she had been pretty hasty, she admitted to herself. And this cowboy had a way of making her believe in him.

"I've just called you boys together," she began to the wondering men, "to tell you I'm still bossin' this drive. But Ty isn't such a bad sub-boss, so he can go ahead."

Torchy smiled winsomely and in a way to admit her defeat in a generous spirit. The cowboys grinned back their old-time affection for the little red head.

Nothing happened that night to bedim their hopes of reaching the Rio Grande successfully. They were only eight miles away. However, small streams troubled them so much that it took them until three o'clock to reach the river. Still the Crowes had made no further trouble.

The historic old river was on the prod right. Its yellow waters rolled high and swift. Driftwood was catching in the bosque on the other side, to make it a mighty poor place to land swimming cattle. Goodnight decided they would have to drive down the

river some three miles, to where he knew numerous sandbars on the opposite bank would afford the cattle a better landing place. Finally, from a point above the bars, he began cutting off small bunches of cattle and shoving them into the river.

This proved slow, hazardous work. Night began to come down and still several hundred head of cattle remained to be crossed. Goodnight had to accept the much more hazardous alternative of trying to cross all these in one bunch before darkness stopped them altogether.

Just above the swimming cattle, Goodnight saw a lapping current lift something hideous out of the water. It was a fence post with its barbed wire still stapled to it. Other posts were floating nearby. Goodnight realized that it was an entire fence, four strands, sweeping down upon the cattle. It would be like a terrible net to tangle the poor creatures, if it were allowed to reach them.

No doubt the fence had been undermined by the turgid waters. But the cowboy could not believe that it had dropped loose exactly at the time most perilous to the herd. Enemy hands had timed it. But that must be taken care of later. He sent his horse up the bank on a dead run, until he had let the fence pass him. Then he plunged his mount into the water and sent it swimming for the drifting fence. Two more cowboys followed after him. All three took down their ropes and built loops.

Torchy also had seen the rolling, twisting fence. But she made the fatal mistake of swimming her horse straight out and coming in below the wire. That seemed the quickest way of stopping its descent upon the cattle. And Torchy was desperate, for she knew they could not lose many cattle and have enough left to net the money they had to have.

Cowboys shouted frantically at her, but the girl could barely hear their cries over the hissing turmoil of water and rain. She thought they merely meant that this was no woman's business. That was where she would fool them. Too late, she realized her extreme peril and tried to make it to the further end of the fence, but the fence posts swept down with greater speed in the swifter current.

The next moment four strands of wire were doubling around her horse. With its feet entangled, the animal was rushed on into the nearest cattle. Then it went under, taking the frail rider with it. Torchy came up one place, the horse another. She was in a spot fairly clear of cattle. However, the mad, roaring water was crowding them back to close the open spot.

Ty Goodnight had just got his wet loop onto a fence post when he saw the girl go under. One other cowboy likewise had looped the fence. Leaving this man to hold the wire back, Goodnight forced his horse downward with the tide until he was near the cattle handicapped by the wire. Then he stood up in his saddle and leaped across to the shoulder of the nearest swimming cow. From there he bounded on, touching one submerged back after another in the mad race to the girl.

The cattle closed in about her before he reached her. He planted a boot in a steer's uplifted face and took a long dive across the backs of two others. He seized her hair as she was sucked under again. Instead of allowing himself also to be drawn under, he clasped one arm about the neck of a swimming steer and held onto Torchy's red hair with the other hand. While they kept moving, he contrived to hold her face above water until she got a better grip on him.

The entangled bunch of cattle had headed back for their starting point. They reached it in scattered bunches, although perhaps half a dozen were lost before they scrambled to the bank and got free of the wire. Goodnight dragged Torchy up onto soggy land. There he dropped her, coughing and

spitting water, to catch his horse as it regained the bank.

He flung himself to the saddle and let Torchy look after herself, while he and the cowboys on this side threw the remnant of the herd back into the river. She watched them fight the last steer into the water, then go riding with them across the raging river.

It grew darker and the storm boomed into terrific volume overhead. Torchy wondered if Goodnight would make it in time. The option could still be saved if they got the money back to Herb Wolgate's store before midnight. The old postmaster had said he would wait up until then. But the store was a dozen miles back behind her, and Goodnight had to swim that rising river in inky blackness.

While the girl was fighting to calm distraught nerves, another blaze of lightning revealed three men riding up to the river bank. Torchy dropped down and crawled toward them through the ensuing darkness. A second flash disclosed the riders as Sherm, Luther and Hort Crowe. They were waiting a little back from the water, with their horses lined up and facing the stream.

As the darkness rushed back, she ran hard for a clump of tornillo brush just behind them. From there she heard the three men shouting to each other above the roar of river and storm.

"They've got to come back with the cash," she heard Luther Crowe bellow forth, "and here's the only place they'll dare ford!"

"Nobody," Hort shouted back, "will be fool enough to try that river but Goodnight!"

For a moment there was silence. Then heavy thunder prevented even shouted conversation. Torchy was afraid she would miss the scheme that this talk betrayed. She stole out and stood close by the tail of the middle horse, which Hort sat. Evidently the men little dreamed of a listener.

"Get him," Luther next shouted, "before he can get over to the bank."

"And let that cash be washed down the river with him?" Hort retorted. "We'll let him make the bank—then get the dough and throw 'im back! Nobody will ever know but what he got drowned, the cash with 'im, just like nobody knows that my bullet dropped old Malone's horse."

Lightning flashed again. The three brothers were crouching low on the bank, close together. Ty was not twenty feet away from them. Torchy screamed out her frantic warning, but her voice was drowned by the roll of thunder following the lightning. She tried to dash forward, but stumbled and fell. As she leaped up, an intensely vivid blaze of lightning lit up the entire river.

While the light lasted, she saw Ty flashing up a gun. The Crowes also were aiming weapons; they had seen each other. Torchy flashed up the Colt which she carried in her hand, just as Ty's gun gave forth little yellow spits through the lessening rain. Two guns also barked from the bank, and the darkness swooped back again. Ty's gun kept streaking fire—so did one gun from the bank. Torchy fired at a point just back of the Crowe gun.

The lightning darted down fitfully. Sherm Crowe was running away; Luther lay sprawled in death, and Hort was hunched over, arms hugging at his abdomen. Ty's horse had its feet on bottom now, hurrying out. The awful night went black again.

But Ty was on the ground now, shouting to her. He rushed up, clutched her in his arms and carried her away from the river. Torchy did not wait for him to stop. She let her arm creep halfway about his neck, then suddenly it clamped tighter.

"Ty," she cried, "kiss me!"

A flash from the sky showed him crushing his lips to hers. And before that first long, mad kiss was ended, still another flash came to reveal them standing there in the new rush of rain, tightly entwined in each other's arms.

# Song of the Leather

A ROMANTIC SERIAL

By Frank C. Robertson

PART THREE

*DOVE SMITH, sheriff of Summit County.*
*BOB DELMAR, owner of the Cross D Ranch.*
*DELSA DELMAR, Bob's sister.*
*SPIKE WATSON, a wanted man.*
*ROLLIN HARKEY, manager of the Seven V L Ranch.*
*ALVIN BRIMBERRY, president of the Alpine bank.*
*CAGNELL and SPARKS, a couple of hired crooks.*

*Delsa Delmar witnesses Sheriff Smith permitting Spike Watson, the murderer of a bank clerk, to escape in the Never Named Hills. Three days later, when a masked hold-up occurs at the bank, Al Brimberry declares that Smith and Watson are the guilty ones, since the sheriff refuses to reveal the fact that at the time of the hold-up he and Delsa were at a cabin where several wanted men are staying.*

*Smith tells Delsa that these men are honest and trustworthy. He considers Spike's crime justifiable, for the murdered man had threatened to make a scandal of the fact that Spike has been financially assisting an unfortunate woman and her children. The sheriff has enlisted the aid of the wanted men to effect Spike's escape.*

*While the townspeople are attending a meeting that Brimberry has called to eject the sheriff, Smith goes to a shack near the Seven V L, where he discovers an empty currency bag and a letter from Harkey, offering two crooks the bank job. After Smith gets the men and puts them in jail, Bob Delmar arrives to accuse the sheriff of killing a Cross D puncher and stealing some of his cattle.*

*Dove soon proves that the cowboy was killed by the same caliber gun that was in the possession of one of Harkey's hired crooks. The sheriff is convinced that Harkey and Brimberry are back of all the shady dealings to clean out the ranchers so that they will be unable to pay off mortgages owing to the banker.*

*Later Harkey tells Delsa that the sheriff had stolen the gun that killed the puncher and that a raid would be made on the jail. When Delsa goes to warn Smith, the sheriff leaves her to speak to the prisoners, Cagnell and Sparks. He returns to find the girl gone and a mob storming the jail. However, the attackers are repulsed by Smith's quick shooting and cold-blooded nerve. While this happens, the prisoners are liberated.*

*In the meantime, Harkey has taken Delsa from the jail, claiming that he wants to protect her from the mob. Later, at Al Brimberry's house, Bob Delmar reports that the sheriff wounded several men in the fray, but Smith himself emerged unscathed.*

## CHAPTER XV

### *Hard Words to Swallow*

FOR the time being the sheriff was stunned. His repulse of the of the mob meant little now that his prisoners had escaped. He still had the letter in his safe linking them with Brimberry and Harkey, but that was of no avail now that his foes had cleverly contrived to blame him for every crime which the men had committed since entering the county.

If it came to a showdown Brimberry and Harkey would no doubt swear that they had imported the two men for the sole purpose of fighting him. The men might even be fixed up with phony papers declaring them detectives.

And he had come within an ace of wringing a complete confession out of them! Could Fate have played a more ghastly joke?

His enemies had failed to murder him. What would be their next move—another attempt at assassination? Or would they dare to arrest him for the murder of Sandy Henderson?

With a wry smile he realized that he had figuratively woven a rope for his own neck when he had pointed out that the Cross D puncher had been killed with a twenty-two high-power rifle. Now Cagnell and Sparks would turn around and swear that the gun had been stolen from them before the murder, and with the aid of Al Brimberry they would make it appear certain that the sheriff had stolen the gun while waiting for an opportunity to plant the looted bank notes upon their persons.

He understood enough law to know that a man couldn't be tried for two crimes at once, and in case of a trial they might have difficulty proving either crime alone. The best they would have against him would be circumstantial evidence. To make the murder charge stick they would have to prove that he had stolen the bulls.

Then, suddenly, a cold chill sped up his spine. He remembered that if his deductions were right, those bulls were now in the possession of Roll Harkey. If they could be used to frame him some way, they would be worth far more to his enemies than their intrinsic value, even if their restoration saved Bob Delmar from bankruptcy. They could get at Delmar some other way with the sheriff out of the road.

How could they manage it? At first thought it appeared a hard thing for them to do. But there was a way, if they but knew it. If ever they learned the real truth about the ranch on Sand Creek it would be easy. If it ever came out that he was the owner of that ranch and that all of its denizens were men who had gone against the law, and those stolen bulls should be suddenly discovered by his enemies in the vicinity of the bug-house ranch, the chain of evidence against him would be complete.

It would add nothing to his defense that he had deliberately given those wanted men a home because he knew that they had been victims of circumstance, men who with a chance would make law-abiding citizens, but who would become embittered enemies of society if sent back to prison.

A cold sweat broke out on his brow when he recollected that two of those men were even now spying upon the Seven V L. Even now his foes might suspect the truth, for they were not fools. But if they happened to catch either Hyde or Hall looking for those bulls upon Seven V L range, they would know that they were acting for the sheriff.

He should get out there at once and take steps to forestall such action by Roll Harkey. He hated to leave town—at least until he found out what had happened to Delsa Delmar—but it would have been the height of foolhardiness for him to have gone out looking for her after what had just occurred. Nevertheless, he vowed

that he would find out what had become of her before he left town.

Somebody rapped upon the main door and Dove stepped out into the hallway demanding to know what was wanted.

"It's me—Hicks—an' I've fetched the doctor," answered the town marshal timidly. Though it was now long after midnight, it was the first time he had put in an appearance.

"Come on in," the sheriff called, and the men entered.

The doctor made a hasty examination of the two wounded men and dispatched Hicks for some stretcher bearers. "Got to get 'em to a bed right away," he grunted. "Can't do anything with 'em here."

"If you've got any spare time you might look at this arm," Dove said. He had gone down to where the other men were.

"Oh! Yeah, sure I will," Dr. Peacock said. "Just a flesh wound, but it's bound to be painful and stiff for a few days. I'll dress it and fix you up a sling."

"Never mind the sling. I'm liable to need that arm," Dove said with grim humor.

The doctor looked at him curiously. "Must have had quite a lively time here," he remarked.

"Nothing special. Just a few rowdies who had to be chased out—those that could run."

Mick Forshee, the wounded puncher, glared up balefully.

"If I were you, Sheriff," the doctor advanced hesitantly, "I think I'd leave this town for a few days. Feeling seems to be running rather high."

"If I were you, Doctor, I think I'd just look after these wounded men," Dove said gently.

The doctor flushed painfully. "It's your own affair, of course," he said stiffly.

Hicks returned with four men to carry the two stretchers the doctor had sent for, and several others whose curiosity overcame their caution trailed along. None of them was dangerous to the sheriff. Dove stood back and listened to their awed chatter, while they in turn watched him with furtive interest.

"Saw Bob Delmar a minute ago lookin' for his sister," Dove overheard one man say.

"Some folks say she was in here all evenin'," another said, with a speculative glance at the sheriff.

"I heard somebody say that Roll Harkey got her out of here before the trouble started," one of the stretcher bearers spoke up.

"But Bob had just come from Brimberry's where his wife was, and the girl wasn't there," the first speaker said.

By this time the party was ready to depart. Sheriff Smith signed for the marshal to remain. He did so with apparent reluctance.

"Hicks, while I was busy with that mob at the front, somebody came in the other way and let those two prisoners out. Whoever did it got my deputy's keys away from him some way. I've got to go after those prisoners an' look for my deputy. I'm leavin' the jail in your charge," Dove said impressively.

"I ain't crazy to take on the job, but I reckon I'll have to," Hicks grunted.

The sheriff went back to his office and opened the safe. The letter to Cagnell from Roll Harkey was still there, and this dispelled any suspicion that Lefty Thomas had sold him out. If the deputy had turned over the keys willingly, he would also have given them the combination to the safe. But he hadn't, and they had had no time to blow it.

The letter was no longer safe there. With Hicks in charge, his enemies would be free to come and go as they chose. Indeed, he was aware that he might never be allowed to enter it again himself, except possibly as a prisoner.

He thrust the letter into a billbook

inside his coat pocket, drew his hat down over his eyes and went out.

By this time the town lay in a deceptive somnolent condition. The saloons had been closed and everybody had vanished from the streets. But behind drawn blinds, or in their beds, people were still talking about the raid on the jail, and of the sheriff who clung to his office by virtue of his six-gun prowess.

Dove went to the stable where he kept his two horses and saddled the fresh one. Then he led the animal outside and rode up the street to Alvin Brimberry's residence. His face was hard and grim as he dismounted and walked up the path. The house was still alight, and when he reached the porch he could hear the hum of voices from inside.

He rapped on the door and then stood to one side. It was answered by the banker himself, who poked his head out and demanded to know what was wanted.

"I want to talk with you, Brimberry," Dove replied coldly.

The banker emitted a frightened squawk, and ducked back as though to close the door in the visitor's face. He changed his mind, however, though he left the door open a mere crack.

"What do you want of me?" he quavered.

"I want to know who is in your house."

The banker began to bluster. "What right have you to invade the sanctity of my home? You haven't got a search warrant, and I happen to know you couldn't get one. What are you looking for, anyhow?"

"No; I ain't got a search warrant," the sheriff acknowledged. "But two prisoners escaped from the jail tonight, and I'm lookin' for one or two other parties besides."

"There's nobody here who wants to see you," Brimberry snapped and started to shut the door. He found the sheriff's booted foot in the way.

"Not so fast, Brimberry," Dove warned. "I can ask you a few questions without any warrant."

"Is that Dove Smith out there?" the sheriff heard a man ask.

"Yes, an' he's got the confounded impudence to demand that I tell him who is in my house," Brimberry replied petulantly.

"Well, why not?" the man inside said. "Me and my family are the only guests in your house. Why don't you let him in?"

"All right—if you say so," the banker acquiesced, and opened the door. "Come in if you want to," he said ungraciously.

Dove Smith promptly accepted the invitation. The big living room which he entered was luxuriously furnished and lighted by gas jets. Beside a fireplace at the far end of the room stood Bob Delmar. Close to him sat his wife, and on the other side of the room was Mrs. Brimberry, a tall, thin woman with an anxious, unhappy expression upon her face.

The sheriff removed his hat and bowed. "Sorry to disturb you ladies at this hour," he apologized, "but I'm very anxious to know if Miss Delmar is all right."

"Well, she's considerably unnerved, but—" Sibyl began, but her husband strode out in front of her and silenced her by a wave of his hand.

"My sister's whereabouts or condition is no affair of yours, sir," Delmar said in an adamant tone.

"I'm not so sure about that, Bob," the sheriff answered quietly. "She was good enough to want to help me prevent a disorderly attack on the courthouse. I have reason to suppose that she was removed from there against her will, so I insist upon knowing whether she suffered any harm."

"Smith, I don't know whether you're intolerably impudent or just a plain fool," Bob Delmar retorted. "My sister has a harum-scarum love of excitement, and that was why she was at your office last evening. She

was persuaded to leave there by a friend who realized that you wouldn't hesitate to take any advantage you could of her presence."

The sheriff's bronzed face had turned several shades paler. His fists were clenched until the nails dug deep into the palms of his hands. No man had ever talked to Dove Smith like that before and got away with it.

"We're in the presence of ladies, Delmar, so you can talk any way you like and be safe," he said in a choked voice. "And I think your sister understands, sir, that she is always safe wherever I am."

"On the contrary, she now understands that you are a thief and a murderer. You're supposed to be a marvel with a gun, and we've had ample evidence that you don't hate to use them, but if you ever speak to my sister again, Smith, I'll kill you on sight," Bob gritted.

Sibyl had got to her feet and was trying to get in front of her husband, in obvious fear that the deadly Dove Smith would murder her husband before her eyes, despite his uttered assurance of immunity.

"Don't be alarmed, ma'am; your husband is perfectly safe at my hands," the sheriff said evenly. "But I refuse to refrain from speakin' to Delsa on anybody else's orders than her own."

"But she doesn't want to see you again," Sibyl cried. "She collapsed right after she got back here tonight. She wants you to let her alone."

"That being the case, there's nothing more to say," Dove said icily, as he backed toward the door. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a smug, malignantly triumphant smile upon Alvin Brimberry's face.

A moment later he was outside.

The sheriff had had about as much as a man could stand up under. It was gall and wormwood to his pride to have to take what Bob Delmar had said to him without resentment, but Sibyl Delmar had dealt him a harder blow than her husband had.

If Delsa didn't want to see him again it would be all right, he told himself. And when he had mounted his horse and loped out of town, his head cleared and he began to understand that he couldn't see her anyway. Bob Delmar was just hotheaded enough to try to make good on his threat, and in that event Dove would either have to kill the rancher or be shot down like a dog. Neither one was a pleasant prospect. The only way out was to obey Delmar's command to the letter. It would be easier now that Delsa herself didn't want to see him.

Sibyl's intuition of this result had caused her to make what she considered a perfectly justified statement about Delsa's feelings without having the girl's authority for such expression. It had produced the desired result.

## CHAPTER XVI

### *Delmar's Ultimatum*

THERE had been little sleep for Bob Delmar that night. He had not got back from his search for the lost bulls until long after dark, and upon learning that his women folks, as well as his riders, had gone to Alpine, he had headed for town posthaste, and had arrived just when the raid on the jail was taking place.

Upon finding Sibyl at Brimberry's he agreed, without enthusiasm, to accept the banker's and his wife's cordial invitation that they remain there for the night. He had thought of little save his sister. Her actions were simply incomprehensible to him. Only her collapse when she learned that the raid had failed of its purpose to murder the sheriff had prevented an immediate clash between them.

Sibyl, the peacemaker, had got Delsa to bed and at least postponed the storm. Then the sheriff himself had put in his unexpected appearance and Bob had uttered his defiance with the full expectation that the

monster, Dove Smith, would mark him down for slaughter. But he was too angry to care. When finally they got to bed, Sibyl had spent most of the remainder of the night urging him not to scold Delsa nor to cross the sheriff's path.

"I'm sure I can answer for Delsa not doing any such wild thing again," she urged. "It was only her love of fair play which made her determined to stay there and warn the sheriff. Frankly, I think it was a gallant thing to do."

"You women!" Bob grated. "No matter how big a crook or a scoundrel a man is, you fall for him."

"Well, the worst thing you can possibly do is to rail at Delsa now," Sibyl insisted. In the end the cowman agreed to let it drop.

Delmar had other things to think about. He believed that the purebloods had permanently vanished. He had borrowed the money from Alvin Brimberry to pay for them, and had given a chattel mortgage on all his stock to insure the payment of that and other obligations. His credit was exhausted, and he wouldn't be able to buy replacements, nor even pay the interest on his debts. Brimberry had plainly hinted that he must pay up.

It was impossible to secure outside loans on account of the reputation which the country possessed. For this he blamed Dove Smith. It had been bad before the man became sheriff, but was far worse since. And Smith was still in the saddle!

Yet it was a desire to bring Sandy Henderson's murderer to justice which lay uppermost in his mind. Not for a moment did it occur to him to doubt the story of the two strangers, backed up as they were by Roll Harkey, that the sheriff had stolen the rifle from them which had been used to murder Sandy. If there was any law left in the land, he proposed to bring that murderer to justice. He was really glad that Smith hadn't been killed by the mob.

In the morning both families ate a somewhat silent breakfast and then the banker suggested to Bob that they go downtown. Bob agreed gladly. He had been ill at ease in the banker's house.

"Bob," Brimberry said unctuously, "I hate to bring it up at such a time, but on account of that robbery the bank is being crowded hard. If we don't get some money in before the state bank inspector arrives we may be closed up. What can you do on those notes?"

"I'll turn over everything I can when I sell my beef," Bob said.

"It won't be enough," Brimberry said. He was no longer the courteous host, but the cold-blooded business man. "We've got to have additional security, and now that you've lost those bulls, you'll have less to offer. I'm afraid you'll have to do something."

Bob remained silent.

"By the way," Brimberry said with an apologetic cough, "hasn't your sister got some money that you can get hold of?"

Bob stopped abruptly and faced the banker. "Look here, Brimberry, I undertook this business on my own hook. If I fail I don't intend to throw anybody else's money away with mine. My sister has got a little money, but it's not enough to do any good—and I wouldn't take it if it did."

"Just thought I'd mention it," Brimberry murmured.

"I've not given up hope of getting those bulls back," Bob said in a milder tone. "If I can, you'd ought to be satisfied with the security I can offer."

"Well, perhaps. If you don't lose any more cattle, and the county was rid of Dove Smith, I know we could. Frankly, Bob, I'm disappointed over last night's affair. I was sure it would rid us of Smith. But your man failed to get him."

"My man? What do you mean?"

"Why, when the raid was planned

some of your men were here. It was agreed that when the sheriff showed himself that one of your men, Tom Dow, was to get him with a bullet. Instead, I understand young Dow got a bullet himself."

"You mean to say that you fellows inveigled one of my boys into agreeing to murder the sheriff?" Delmar demanded angrily.

"He was to be the executioner, so to speak. You see, it was one of your men whom the sheriff killed."

"I never did approve of that mob idea. If Harkey had to go through with it, why didn't he do the killing himself?" Bob complained.

"We might ask him. He's standing there in front of that saloon."

The Seven V L foreman had slept in town and apparently he had just got out of bed. He greeted them with a lazy yawn. "Man, but this town's dead this mornin'," he drawled. "I'm glad to see somebody alive."

"And maybe not so glad to see somebody else alive," Brimberry said cuttingly. "The sheriff seems to be enjoying good health."

"Well, it won't be long," Harkey scowled.

"Didn't you have men enough to whip one man?" the banker snapped. "Next time get a couple of hundred men. That ought to give you odds enough."

"Hold your hawsses, Al," the young foreman said coldly. "That raid was your idee. A mob has never got the savvy to git a man who's got guts, an' Dove Smith has got 'em. I wasn't present because I had to git Bob's sister out of danger, but I wouldn't have shot Smith if I could."

"What?"

"Don't worry about Smith. I'll git him. An' I won't have any mob to help me either. I'm through foolin'; I mean to shoot it out with him face to face."

"You're a fool," Brimberry snapped. "He'll kill you."

"I'm gamblin' that I'm faster on the draw than he is. If nobody else has got the guts to face him, I have," Harkey boasted, his gaze directed at Bob Delmar.

The latter flushed. It seemed to be an implication upon his own courage. It was his man who had been killed, his cattle that had been stolen, and finally it was his sister whose name was being bandied about in connection with Dove Smith's. It was up to him. And Bob Delmar was proud as Lucifer.

"I'm not bragging of my skill as a gunfighter," he said. "I suppose that I wouldn't have much chance in a quick-draw contest with Smith, and I won't resort to dry-gulching or underhand methods. But I'll not ask any man to fight my battles. If you'll leave this to me I'll dispose of our outlaw sheriff—or die in the attempt."

"Here, here, you young hot-heads—we can't afford to waste your lives that way," Brimberry protested. "Any man is a fool who starts a single-handed fight against Dove Smith when there are men in the country who'll do the job safely for a hundred dollars."

"Leave him to me, Bob," Harkey advised.

"And both of you leave him to me," Brimberry snapped.

"If you'll open your bank, Mr. Brimberry, I'd like to write a letter," Bob said.

"Why, surely."

All three went into the bank and Brimberry supplied Bob with the necessary stationery. He wrote for a few minutes; then handed the result to Brimberry, who read it without comment and passed it on to Rollin Harkey. The letter was addressed to Sheriff Smith, and it read:

> Recent occurrences have convinced all decent-minded citizens that you have dishonored the office to which you were elected. Various crimes, I believe, are directly attributable to you. Recently those crimes have seemed to be aimed at my outfit, so much so that I now feel personally obligated to ac-

complish your removal from office. I now call upon you to resign as sheriff within twenty-four hours from the receipt of this note. If you refuse, this county will be too small to hold both of us. I shall shoot you on sight.

Yours truly,

Robert Delmar.

"Better tear it up, Bob," Harkey urged. "You're not fast enough for him."

"I know it. But there'll be no question of a quick draw if I can help it. I intend to have my gun in my hand before we get in range."

"Smith will never let you do a fool thing like that—and this letter will let him get away with it," Brimberry said. "I can see right now that something has got to be done sudden to save our young friend here."

Nevertheless, the letter was stamped and mailed. An hour later Bob was on his way home with Sibyl and Delsa.

Brimberry and Harkey watched them ride away. The banker began to chuckle. "Something sure got under his skin, and it's a great thing for us."

"What do you mean?" his companion asked.

"Simply that whether it's Delmar or the sheriff who gets killed the other one will be blamed for it."

"That may be all right, but I wasn't foolin' when I said I meant to shoot it out with Smith," Harkey declared.

"Have you gone crazy? Why take a chance when the other way is a cinch?"

"Girl trouble," Harkey grinned. "I don't mind sayin' I've got a case on Delsa Delmar. I mean to show her I'm not afraid of Dove Smith."

"You're a fool," the banker rasped. "No woman is worth considerin' where business is concerned. With this bull-headed sheriff, an' maybe Delmar out of the way, the Seven V L, the Cross D and half a dozen other outfits are practically in our hands. Then we could squeeze out every trifling nester in the country. And you'd risk it all because some fool girl has challenged your vanity!"

"Don't worry about me," Harkey sneered. "I'm just as good with a gun as Dove Smith, and there's tricks in every trade. I'll have the edge all right when I meet the sheriff."

"What about those bulls?" Brimberry inquired. "Are they where Smith can't find 'em?"

"Absolutely. But if he does it'll be just too bad for him. I'm going to have Sparks and Cagnell stay with 'em all the time, an' if anybody does snoop around, they'll just be flirting with the undertaker."

"Still, I wish we could git something on this damned sheriff," the banker complained bitterly; "something he'd really done. This shooting and killing is the method of roughnecks. But you get something on a man and you can make him useful without so much risk."

"If you think you can git anything like that on Smith you're goofy."

"Just the same, I'm dead certain that 'Dove Smith' is an alias. And a man don't go around under an assumed name without a reason. If I could only find out," Brimberry said longingly.

## CHAPTER XVII

### *Dove Rides a Blind Trail*

IT was not yet daybreak when the sheriff rode up to the house on Sand Creek, known scoffingly as the abode of freaks, and gave a shout. Instantly the white whiskers of old Alex Logan were shoved out of an open window.

"What's wanted?" he demanded in a voice rusty with sleep.

"It's the sheriff, Alex."

"What's up? Has anything happened?" Alex asked excitedly.

"Plenty. There was a raid on the jail last night. They didn't get me as they figgered, but they did sneak those two prisoners away. But that's not what I want to talk about."

"Git off an' come in. . . . Freddy, lam outa here an' take keer of Dove's horse. . . . Fuzzy, git up an' build a fire," the old man called.

Before Dove could enter the house, curly-headed Freddy Cook slipped out. As always, he cast a furtive glance at the sheriff out of his shoe-button black eyes.

"H'lo, Sheriff," he said huskily, and hurried on to the horse. Before leading the horse to the stable he paused long enough to lay his cheek against its muzzle, while he caressed the animal's sleek neck and uttered little crooning sounds.

Dove looked at the little fellow and smiled kindly. Unlike all the others at the bughouse, he was city-bred—a veritable child of the gutters. He had never before known the freedom of the country; had never had the privilege of handling animals. And the way he loved horses told the sheriff that he needed only the right kind of encouragement to make his stunted soul grow into that of a man's.

Old Fuzzy was crawling into his overalls when Dove entered the cabin, while Alex Logan had lighted the kerosene lamp and was standing beside the table barefooted and in red flannel drawers and undershirt. Any other man would have looked ridiculous in such a garb, but there was a calm, superb dignity about the man that rose above any such trifling matter as attire.

"Have they got you on the run, Dove?" he asked softly.

"Not yet;" the sheriff answered, and his lips unconsciously set in grim, straight lines. "They made a try last night an' almost succeeded. But it's the future I'm thinkin' of. Where's Red Hall an' Lone Hyde?"

"They're over at the Seven V L lookin' for them Cross D bulls."

"I've got to find 'em right away."

"Wal, they're a pair o' hard birds to find once they start trackin' somethin'," Alex said dubiously. "That Lone Hyde is a reg'lar Injun, an' Red makes up in tenacity whut he lacks in skill. I reckon the best way to git in touch with them birds is to wait till one of 'em drifts in. They said one of 'em would be in sometime this forenoon to report."

"I suppose that's right, but I'm worried," Dove said.

"You'd jest as well calm yourself, Dove, 'cause frettin' won't bring 'em back one second sooner, an' nobody could likely find 'em. Set down an' tell us what happened whilst breakfast is a-cookin'."

There was good, hard sense in the old man's remarks, and Dove made an effort to content himself. He related what had taken place that night, and then voiced his reasons for wanting to see the two spies.

"Once let 'em ever suspect the truth about things here an' we're done," he finished.

"An' on the other hand, if Red and Lone finds them bulls on the Seven V L range they're done," Alex said. "An' I don't see how they could possibly drive them bulls over here if we're alert to keep 'em from it."

"Well, I hope we'll see 'em first," the sheriff said wryly.

"What about that gal you brought here to dinner that day?" Alex queried presently. "If she told her brother how friendly we was, they might suspect something. She was a nice gal, but I'm afraid it was a mistake bringin' her here."

"I don't think she'll say anything, an' I don't think she'll be around again," Dove said, and something in his tone made old Alex look up quickly.

Twelve o'clock came, and neither of the men had appeared. Dove had been growing more restless with every passing minute.

"I'm goin' over there an' have a look around," he declared. "It's still my job to be lookin' for those bulls, an' I've got a missin' deputy somewhere that I've got to locate."

"Man, you'd be insane to ride over there," Alex said. "That outfit would murder you on sight."

"I've never run from 'em yet—it's too late to start in now," Dove smiled crookedly.

"Then, by hookity, I'm goin' with you," Alex averred.

"That would fix me plenty," Dove pointed out. "No; I'm going alone." He led out his horse, and rode away toward the Seven V L range.

This time he had no intention of visiting the ranch headquarters. That would be crowding his luck too far. Instead, he began to ride a wary circle about the place with the hope that he might pick up the tracks of the wagon that had been used to haul hay to Delmar's high-priced animals, or better yet, find a few wisps of hay that might have fallen from the wagon.

The country immediately surrounding the Seven V L Ranch was a sea of juniper-covered hills; not particularly high, but usually steep, and in many places threaded with reefs of black and gray lava rock like the fancy work on a huge doily. There were irregular open places, covered with tall sagebrush, while here and there were gigantic cracks in the earth, with walls of almost perpendicular solid rock—the result of ancient, cataclysmic upheavals. In a way it afforded as good a hiding place as the more spectacular Never Named Hills.

Dove was winding his way among the juniper knolls, close to a long fifty-foot deep gash in the earth known as Three Mile Gorge, when some object zipped past his face with a noise like an enraged hornet. He jerked his head involuntarily, and as he did so he heard the sullen boom of a rifle.

He spurred his horse toward a nearby clump of junipers, scanning as he did so the rocky, timbered knolls ahead from which the shot had assuredly come.

Wisdom dictated that he beat an immediate retreat while the way was open, but the fever of the chase was upon him. The object of his search must be close at hand. If so the animals would be removed to some other place before he could collect enough men to come back and take them.

He knew that the bullet might have come from some Seven V L puncher who had chanced to see him first, but it was improbable since there was no logical reason for any puncher riding that close to the ranch at such a time. He was sure the man was guarding the stolen bulls.

He had no sooner reached shelter when a second bullet whipped through the limbs of the junipers. That time he spied the wisp of smoke. It was good long rifle distance away, but apparently the fellow had decided to chance a long shot rather than mix it with such a foeman at closer range.

Dove hesitated for half a minute to consider a plan of battle. He carried a carbine under his stirrup fender, but he wasn't sure of the advisability of carrying on a long-range duel with his assailant just then.

Suddenly his eyelids narrowed and he gathered up his bridle reins. He had decided upon his course of action. If he could make a fast ride for about four hundred yards without getting hit, he would have his antagonist between him and the deep, unscalable crevice. They would be on equal terms to begin with, but with luck he could drive his man into the open. He wanted to see who the fellow was, and to make him a prisoner if it were humanly possible.

Even as he dashed out of the clump of junipers at full gallop, he knew in his heart that he had let his eagerness to accomplish something definite get the better of his usual well balanced judgment.

*Wham!* A rifle bullet split the atmosphere a yard behind him. *Crack!* A second one hummed still closer.

No shoddy marksman was this hombre in the knolls.

Then the sheriff had gained the protection of a small knoll. He half circled around it and dashed for another one. Again the concealed sniper warmed his rifle barrel, but this open space was narrower. At least two-thirds of the distance Dove had figured that he would have shelter and at the end he wouldn't be appreciably nearer to his foe, though he would be in better position then to do some fighting on his own account.

A shallow, winding gully had to be crossed. He said how-do-you-do to two more bullets before he dropped into it, but his greatest danger would come when he had to leave it. In the bottom he was safe. He could look at something besides the place where his enemy was hiding. And suddenly, there in the bottom of that gully, he came upon the very thing he had been looking for—wagon tracks.

More than that, clinging to the branch of a sarvisberry bush hung a wisp of cured hay.

Now that he was this close to the evidence of his enemies' crookedness nothing short of death could have checked him from seeing it through. He dug his horse sharply with the rowels, and it shot up over the rim of the gully.

The unknown enemy was expecting him. The moment he appeared in sight a bullet struck the steel fork of his saddle with a hollow thud. Three inches higher up and it would have got the sheriff through the middle.

Just as the second shot came, the sheriff's horse was taking a rise over high ground. The man's aim was good this time, but he hadn't figured on the way the horse was climbing. That bullet struck the animal squarely between the eyes.

Dove felt his horse stop as though it had struck some invisible barrier. He had heard the sickening thud of lead meeting bone and divined instantly what it meant. Just in time he jerked his foot out of the stirrup, for after that one momentary pause his horse fell suddenly upon its right side.

The sheriff went to the ground, too, but in a flash he was temporarily sheltered behind the dead horse. His carbine was on the left side of the animal, and he reached over and drew it out, while another bullet plunked into the still quivering flesh of the horse.

He was afoot in enemy territory! That meant that he simply had to dispose of this enemy, and do it soon. He had almost achieved his objective and he was ready for the fight. His chances, he felt, were still as good as the other man's—but not for long.

He had scarcely freed his carbine when he saw two other men running to join the fray. Even as they dived behind shelter he recognized them as Sparks and Cagnell. Three against one—and he had no means of escape!

## CHAPTER XVIII

### *The Battle in the Junipers*

THERE was now no doubt in Dove Smith's mind that he had tracked his enemies to the place where Bob Delmar's bulls were being concealed, but he certainly wasn't in any position to be filled with optimism. Less than twenty-four hours before he had also been on the verge of getting a confession from these same men, under conditions far more favorable than the present ones, and they had slipped out of his fingers. Now, if any slipping was to be done, he must do it.

To think about getting away, even if he were of the mind to run, was sheer folly. To hope that he could stand off three determined men for very long seemed equally foolish. For all he knew, there might be more men around.

The dead horse was no longer even a temporary refuge. His first assailant was still peppering away and his aim

was getting better with every shot. Dove had no desire to stay there and be splattered with blood and horseflesh until the other two could execute a flank movement and pick him off.

He watched for his chance and when a bullet thudded into the mangled carcass of the horse, he drew a bead on the spot from which the shot had come and let drive. Instantly he saw a gun barrel jerked into the air and out of sight again, and he knew he had come close. He levered in another cartridge and aimed about a foot to the left.

"You son of a coyote!" yelled the fellow impulsively, and Dove warmed at the knowledge that if he hadn't nicked the man he had come close.

Cagnell and Sparks had appeared at a right angle from the other man, whose voice Dove had recognized as that of Lute Lannard. Cagnell had dropped into the same gully, lower down, which Dove had just crossed, while his partner was circling around to cross the sheriff's trail and get ahead of him.

Dove quickly made his plans. He grabbed the carbine in one hand, rolled to his feet, and plunged back toward the gully. A bullet from Sparks' rifle sang overhead and just as he got to the gully lip Lannard fired but also too high. Then he struck the bottom of the gully and for the moment was out of sight.

"Look out, George—he's in that gulch," Sparks yelled at his partner.

Dove figured that they would expect him to run up the gully in an attempt to get away from them. For that reason he thought both Sparks and Lannard would hasten up to cover the head of the draw when he came out. In some ways that was his best move, for the ravine was sure to be a trap if he stayed in it. Nevertheless, he turned down instead of up. He hoped to meet Cagnell.

The ravine was shallow all the way, and the farther down he got the wider it became. He knew that it would eventually peter out, but that was the other side of Cagnell. He carried the carbine in his left hand and a six-gun in his right as he advanced.

"Hey, hadn't I better ride to the ranch an' git the boys?" came the squeaky voice of Mel Davis.

"Not yet. We got him in this draw an' he can't git out. I'll watch here to see that he don't break out. You an' Lute close in above to help Sparks drive him back down here," Cagnell called in reply.

With a muttered curse the sheriff realized that he had guessed wrong, although the other horn of the dilemma would have been just as sharp. Cagnell was undoubtedly waiting for him to come down and the man would be under cover while he would be exposed. And there were four foes instead of three, even though he didn't rate Mel Davis too highly.

If he went down the ravine or up he would be killed. If he remained stationary the result would be the same. He could feel the jaws of the trap closing, and the same kind of silent fury possessed him which makes a captured, full-grown wolf a fighting maniac even after its eyes are glazed with approaching death.

He turned and ran a hundred yards back up the draw, paused a moment to get his breath and to holster his six-shooter. Then, the carbine gripped in both hands and held ready to fire, he quit the ravine on the north side.

"There he goes!" squealed Mel Davis.

Out of the corner of his eye Dove saw Sparks about a hundred and fifty yards away from him. Lute Lannard was perhaps twenty-five yards farther away, while Mel Davis was still beyond Lannard. His foes were all armed with rifles. Six-guns were of little use at such long range.

Sparks was the dangerous one, Dove knew. The fellow had dropped to one knee when Dove first saw him, and he was already taking aim. Without even

trying to raise his carbine to his shoulder, the sheriff thrust it out and pulled the trigger. He had once spent an entire winter with a trapper, and from him he had learned the knack of firing a rifle without drawing a bead.

Few trappers ever take the trouble to aim at an animal in a trap. They learn to point the gun at a contorting animal with remarkable accuracy. Dove had mastered the art. But there the range was seldom more than twenty feet. A target one hundred and fifty yards away was something entirely different. There was no time to do anything except to trust to that acquired instinct to point a rifle as he might his finger.

As he pulled the trigger the reports of the two guns blended in an angry roar. Where Sparks' bullet went Dove never knew, but he saw his adversary topple over on one hand, claw at his breast with the other hand for a moment while he seemed to be trying to arise, and then fall forward upon his face as the supporting arm weakened.

The sheriff didn't stop. He ran for the nearest clump of junipers, levering in a fresh cartridge as he did so. Cagnell was now shooting at him from below, and the man's bullets were kicking up the dirt all around him. But Lannard, the man who was in position to do the most damage, had far-sightedly decided to look to his own defense and was legging it for another juniper knoll. Dove didn't trouble to see what had become of Mel Davis.

Once among the scraggly junipers, Dove again paused to recover his breath and size up the situation. It wasn't a carefree moment, for a shot from Lute Lannard's rifle knocked the bark from a tree within inches of his head. Below him a line of junipers extended almost to the gully he had vacated. Now he caught glimpses of George Cagnell slipping through those trees. He took a shot at the man, but quickly realized the futility of trying to hit him.

He was now at the foot of a knoll. If he turned to the right he would meet Cagnell; if to the left, Lannard. Either man was smart enough to stay sheltered and make him take to the open. The only way he could move was straight up the knoll.

The junipers he was now in were too sparse to afford adequate protection. Sooner or later, with his foes pecking at him from all sides, a bullet would search him out. The net was tightening about him. He could see Sparks lying upon the ground, and the man didn't move. At any rate, he thought, Sandy Henderson's murderer had been brought to justice.

With every passing moment Cagnell was getting into a better position. The sheriff couldn't wait. He wriggled out of his shelter and started to run for the hilltop. There were scattering junipers all the way, with occasional thick clumps which afforded a resting place.

Every time he moved his foes turned their guns upon him, but the battle was still being fought at long range, where most of the shots were sure to go wild. However, Dove knew that the law of averages was against every shot scoring a miss. Sooner or later, unless he got some kind of a lucky break, one of them would tag him.

He was two-thirds of the way up the slope when it happened. He had just dodged across a ten-foot open space and dived between two crooked-boled trees when something struck the calf of his leg with terrific force. He tumbled as if somebody had chopped him down with an ax. For a moment the pain was excruciating, much like a blow on the crazy bone, only far more severe. It was quickly succeeded by a numb feeling, and his entire leg seemed to be asleep. He had to use his hands to move it.

Fortunately, he had fallen into a sort of depression between the trees, and the wide-sprangled roots presented a fair kind of barricade for the

moment. Dove could see where the bullet had torn a ragged hole through the soft leather of his boot where it had come out on the inner side, and he could feel the warm blood flowing down to his foot. He concluded from the uselessness of his leg that the bone must have been shattered. If so, nothing remained to do except make his last stand where he lay.

"I think I got him, Lute," Cagnell yelled. "Crawl in close, but keep a sharp watch. He may be shammin'."

"What about holdin' him in there till Mel goes for the boys?"

"Good idee," Cagnell responded. "But be sure he don't slip out."

Dove heard Lannard shouting for Davis to go to the ranch for help, and the fellow added his opinion of Mel on account of the distance he had kept in the rear.

"What the hell do you figger he's usin'—a cannon?" he finished up. "If he had a pea-shooter you'd think it was a rifle. Git to hell outa here an' bring back some real men."

During the brief respite, Dove experimented with his leg. It wasn't quite so numb now, and an exquisite throbbing was taking its place. But he could wiggle his toes and shift the leg up and down. He began to think that the bone wasn't broken.

He took off his bandanna neckerchief and knotted it tightly about the leg, above the wound, though he thought with grim humor that it was a mere waste of time. He wasn't going to get to use that leg again, anyway.

Once he raised up a bit too high and instantly a rifle bullet grazed his back. He dropped down again with a wholehearted oath.

Should he surrender when Harkey and more of his crew returned, or should he fight it out until they dropped him in his tracks? He thought the matter over quite calmly and decided not to give himself up.

"Hey, Sheriff, don't you wish you had that shotgun at my back now?" Cagnell jibed.

"No; it'll be more pleasure to fasten a noose around your neck when you're hung for murder," Dove retorted.

"Why don't you give up, Dove?" Lute Lannard joined in. "You can't git away, an' them bulls of Delmar's are gittin' hungry. We'd like to feed 'em some hay." The man laughed confidently.

The next second Lute Lannard uttered a far different sound. An alarmed yell, that was almost a shriek of fear, issued from his lips. Before it was finished a gun cracked, and Dove again heard the sickening impact of lead upon bone.

"That settles your hash, I reckon," came a low contemptuous voice, and Dove saw the harsh, fanatical features of Lone Hyde appear in sight. He was carrying a smoking rifle and his red-rimmed eyes were scanning the junipers for somebody else to shoot at.

Lone Hyde had once been the owner of a small ranch and a little bunch of cattle. He was a man who let other people alone and expected the same treatment in return. There had been a big cow outfit that had failed to heed his warning. They had set out upon a campaign of petty irritations with the object of forcing him to leave the country. Hyde had come upon two of them befouling his drinking water and had killed them on the spot. Forthwith, he had become an outlaw.

These things Dove Smith had known. He had had a chance to arrest the man and send him back to be hung. It hadn't seemed right. He knew that Hyde was all right if people would leave him alone. Instead, though not without misgivings, he had sent him out to Alex Logan.

About the same time he heard Red Hall yell, "Where's the other one, Dove?" Hall was on the other side of him, but farther up the knoll.

"Below me, an' a little to your left," Dove answered. "I can't navigate or I'd help you. But watch out for him."

A minute later Lone Hyde reached the spot where Dove lay. "Did they

git you, Dove?" he asked fiercely, but his eyes betrayed the utmost anxiety.

"No; I'm all right," Dove said quickly. "For Gawd's sake don't let Cagnell git away."

Hyde wavered a moment and then started on. Dove could hear the men running, and a few minutes later he heard a couple of shots. But Cagnell had fled at the first hint of danger, and he had a good lead. They had glimpsed him for a moment, but neither man had been lucky enough to score a hit. The next they saw of Cagnell he was mounted upon a horse and was out of range. The dejected rescuers returned to Dove and reported failure.

"Well, it's too danged bad," the sheriff commented, and it wasn't the mere fact that Cagnell had escaped which worried him. It was that the man would know who had rescued him. The thing he had feared had come to pass. His foes would now know that he was directly connected with the house of freaks on Sand Creek.

## CHAPTER XIX

### *When the Flesh Is Weak*

"I'M plumb sorry we didn't nail that cuss," big, red-headed, freckle-faced Red Hall said apologetically. "We come up from the other side o' the knoll when we heard the shootin', an' as it come from two sides we decided to split an' each one of us take a man. I reckon I was a leetle slow because Lone got his man before I'd located mine."

The sheriff knew that it was a generous statement. By rights Lone Hyde should have waited until both were ready, but Hall was ready to assume the blame. Indeed, he was always like that. Dove Smith had never met a bigger hearted man in his life. He had known Red Hall many years; known him before the man had broken out of a penitentiary where he was serving time for a crime which Dove would have staked his life that he had never committed.

"I'm not complainin'," Dove said quickly. "I orta be plumb grateful that you arrived in time to save my life. They had me corralled an' the iron all hot."

"We sorta figgered we was on the right trail when we seen them two hombres we'd watched before, a-circlin' away from the Seven V L a heap too wary to be nat'ral, but we was in so close to the ranch we dassn't leave until things quieted down. We'd just about lost their trail when Lannard an' Davis come a-foggin' along. They was ridin' at a lope, an' us bein' afoot they was soon outa sight, but Lone here tracked 'em down.

"Finally, we heard shootin', so we hurried up. From the top o' this knoll we saw your dead horse, so we knowed you was in a tight fix an' we took a hand soon as we could," Red Hall explained.

"You certainly arrived at the right time," Dove said gratefully. "But now we gotta git outa here pronto. Davis has gone back for help, an' we'll be in just as bad a fix as I was if we're still here."

"Can you be moved?" Red asked. "If you can't I'll stay here while Lone goes after some help for our side."

"I'll travel some way," the sheriff said with stoical determination. "You say Cagnell got away on a horse? There must be at least two more around somewhere. See if you can find 'em. An' those Cross D bulls are right around here close. I'd take a long chance to git my eyes on 'em."

They assisted the sheriff to his feet, and though his leg hurt terrifically he forced himself to use it and hobbled down the hill with Red Hall's assistance. Lone Hyde hurried on ahead to look for horses.

Within fifteen minutes Hyde came back leading the horses belonging to the two dead men. They assisted Dove onto one horse and Red Hall mounted the other. Lone Hyde refused to

mount behind either of them and kept alongside on foot.

It was an easy matter to locate the registered Herefords, though the hiding place was so cunning that under other circumstances nobody would ever have discovered them except by sheer accident. They found where the hay wagon had been taken along a twelve-foot wide rock shelf into a small amphitheater just large enough to permit a wagon to be turned around.

This amphitheater was entirely surrounded by a heavy growth of foliage, except for one small space on the south side. The only entrance into it was along that shelf. More than a ton of hay was stacked against the brush.

They rode close to the one open space and looked down. Below them, in a sort of grotto blocked off from the main crevice, were the animals they were looking for. Their sleek red backs were shining, and at the sounds above they lifted their broad white faces eagerly, expecting to be fed. It was an easy matter to throw the hay down to them, and from the other side of their natural corral was a dangerous trail which a man could negotiate, but an animal couldn't.

There was an abrupt bend just above where the grotto opened out into the main chasm, and here two lengths of strong poles had been set up as a barrier which even bulls couldn't break down. The men could see that from the bottom of the chasm this side pocket would be unnoticed. The bars would be out of sight, and there was nothing out of the ordinary to lead a person to investigate. The outlaws had been camped a short distance above.

"Shall I climb down an' let down those bars?" Lone Hyde asked.

"No; that's just what we don't want to do," the sheriff said. "We want Bob Delmar to know just how they're bein' held. We must git outa here."

"They won't be here when we git back," Red Hall pointed out.

"I know it, but our only chance is to find Delmar an' git back here before they can move 'em off the Seven V L range. They're almost certain now to drive 'em toward Sand Creek. If they git 'em there nothin' will ever make Bob Delmar believe that we ain't the rustlers," Dove stated.

"I'll stick around here an' see what they do," Lone Hyde remarked laconically.

It seemed to be a good idea. They all turned and went back out. Here they parted. It was Dove's wish that Red Hall return to the Sand Creek Ranch and warn Alex Logan to be on the alert against any skullduggery Roll Harkey and his crowd might try to pull. Red was loath to let the sheriff ride along in his weakened condition, but Dove insisted that he was equal to the ride. They wrapped another handkerchief around the wound to lessen the bleeding and he left them.

Dove knew that a showdown of some sort was imminent. He was appalled when he realized how late it was getting to be. Darkness would be a great help to his enemies. He spurred his horse to a gallop, and found the animal had a high, bone-jarring gait which was sheer torture to his wounded leg.

Cold sweat stood out over his body, and the loss of blood caused him to reel weakly in the saddle. There were times when everything seemed to turn black, and he kept in the saddle only by a death grip on the saddle horn. Even his thoughts became so chaotic that he was seized with the fear that he would be delirious when he reached the Cross D and be unable to make them understand.

He wondered what kind of a reception he would get. After last night he knew it wouldn't be a cordial one. They had told him that Delsa didn't want to see him any more, and nothing but the direst necessity could have prevailed upon him to go there. His condition speedily grew such that

it took all the concentration of his will to enable him to get there at all.

At the best, he knew that the Seven V L crowd would get back to the hidden corral before he could reach the Cross D. He had ordered Lone Hyde to follow, and not try to stop them. He thought he was getting all the speed there was in the horse he was riding, but he wasn't. The animal had dropped into a slow, racking lope which jarred that wounded leg into agony with every step, and the tormented sheriff was too sick to notice the equine's deception.

He had long since forgotten about the attempt that had been made to murder him the previous night and overlooked the fact that two-thirds of the men he might meet would gladly sink a bullet into him at the first opportunity.

He had a sense of having been asleep when he suddenly realized that he had arrived at the Delmar ranch. He was indeed staying in the saddle by an instinctive sense of balance. But at the sound of voices he roused himself by a titanic effort of will.

"What the hell are you doin' here?" a harsh, unfriendly voice assailed his ears.

He recognized Brick Allred and Andy Shumway, two of Delmar's trusted punchers. It was the former who had spoken.

"I've gotta see Bob," he said.

"Look here, Smith, if you've come here to try any of your dirty work you're in the wrong pew," Allred warned. "Any man on this outfit would love to feed you hot lead."

"I want to see Bob," the sheriff said huskily.

"Good God, he's sick!" Andy Shumway said. "Go call Bob, Brick."

"Thanks," Dove said, and managed a faint smile. "You see, I found those missin' bulls of yours an'—"

"You did?" Shumway exclaimed. "Where?"

"Over in the junipers near the Seven V L."

"Hurry, Brick," Shumway ordered.

A few minutes later Bob Delmar came out of the house, following Allred. He had buckled on his six-gun and his face was hard.

"Well, what have you got to tell me?" he demanded crisply.

"Delmar, your bulls were swiped by them two bank robbers. They've been hidin' 'em on the Seven V L range, an' feedin' 'em with hay from the Seven V L barn. Form your own conclusions. I found 'em today an' had a little gunfight, but if you'll hurry up you can find the place just off what they call the Three Mile Gorge, about the middle of it, where they've been held."

"You mean you're accusing the Seven V L of stealing those bulls?" Delmar demanded incredulously.

"If you hurry up you'll find that outfit drivin' 'em somewhere right now."

"Get your horses, boys," Delmar snapped. He turned back to Dove. "Smith, if this is some sort of trap you're leading us into I warn you that every man on my outfit has his orders not to let you get away alive."

"Oh, hell, man—try an' be sensible for once in your life," Dove said disgustedly. His horse turned around and suddenly Delmar noticed the brand on its left shoulder.

"How does it happen you're riding a Seven V L horse?" he asked.

"They killed mine, an' I took one of theirs."

"Yeah? Well, I want to see what Harkey and his men have to say about that fight," Delmar said skeptically.

"Well, hurry," the sheriff gasped. He had turned deathly sick, and once more things were turning black. But this time they stayed that way. Bob Delmar had started to walk toward the stables when he noticed Smith start to reel in the saddle. For the first time then he saw that the man was white as a ghost. He turned back just in time to catch the sheriff in

his arms as Dove fell from his horse.

Delmar yelled, and not only brought the men back from the corral, but the women from the house. Delsa was the first to arrive.

"What is it? What's happened to him?" she asked excitedly.

"He claims he had a fight with the Seven V L trying to get those stolen Hereford bulls away from 'em, but I'd sooner believe it was the other way about," Delmar said grimly. "Anyway, we'd better git him into the house."

It was half an hour before Bob Delmar got away from the ranch with his cowboys. It was then after sundown. They rode at a fast trot, but darkness descended about them long before they reached the Three Mile Gorge. It was a dangerous place to ride in after dark, so Delmar altered their course and rode straight to the Seven V L Ranch.

As they rode past the corrals they found one that was filled with huge shadowy forms with immaculately white faces.

"They're here," Andy Shumway breathed. "Now what do you make of that?"

"We'll soon find out," Bob declared in an expressionless voice.

When they stopped they saw a man walking from the bunkhouse to the house. He promptly turned back, and it was Roll Harkey himself.

"Why, hello, Bob," he greeted cordially, "you musta got the news in a hurry."

"What news is that?" Bob asked coldly.

"Why, about the bulls. I sent Parl Whiting over to tell you I had 'em in the corral. Didn't you see him?"

"No, I didn't," Delmar said, and his voice had suddenly become embarrassed. "We got our information from Dove Smith, an' I suppose it wasn't quite straight. Tell me what happened."

"Well, we've found out how the sheriff has been gittin' away with so much crookedness, an' it makes me tired to think we didn't guess it long ago," Harkey explained. "You see he's been in with that gang o' freaks over on Sand Creek. Mebbe they ain't as freaky as we've been thinkin'. Anyway, today some of my boys run across the sheriff an' a couple of them tryin' to work those bulls over into the Never Named Hills. There was a fight, an' they killed one of our men, Lute Lannard. But we got your live stock."

"Smith himself got a nasty wound in the leg," Bob informed. "He was unconscious from loss of blood when we left home."

"Then, by Gawd," Harkey said triumphantly, "we got him at last."

## CHAPTER XX

### *The Real Crooks*

DELSA DELMAR had been a strangely subdued girl since the raid on the Alpine jail. The surprise of hearing that the sheriff hadn't been killed had caused her to faint for the first time in her life. She had been keyed up too high, and the reaction had simply bowled her over.

She had been surprised that Bob hadn't treated her to a long lecture, and when he didn't she was only too glad to keep the peace herself.

In spite of the mass of evidence against the sheriff she had maintained a stubborn faith in his integrity. The thing that had shaken her faith more than any other one thing was the story she had heard of his ruthlessness in tying up his prisoners with loaded shotguns against their backs.

From Sibyl she had learned of Bob's threat to kill Dove Smith on sight, if he ever spoke to her again.

"You can see, dear, that for Bob's sake alone you must keep away from that terrible sheriff," Sibyl pleaded. "I suppose there is a terrible fascination about such men—I can feel it myself—but they're too dangerous to monkey with."

"I don't suppose that'll take any effort on my part," Delsa replied dryly. The sheriff, she thought, would think her a quitter. He wasn't likely to trouble her again. But despite all that they said against him, she was quietly thrilled by the way he had single-handedly repulsed the mob.

His dramatic arrival at the Cross D Ranch that evening had, however, instantly shaken her out of the apathy that had claimed her all day. She had been watching through the window when he fell from his horse, and it had given her a pang of anxiety which she didn't then stop to analyze. The fear that he might be dead brought a queer constriction to her throat.

They had carried the unconscious man into the house, and she had breathed a sigh of relief when they learned that his wounds were comparatively minor. She had herself undertaken the job of dressing them properly.

"This is a nasty wound through the calf of his leg, but it never would have floored a tough hombre like him if he hadn't plumb abused it," Andy Shumway said. "He never orta moved till the bleedin' was plumb stopped."

"Well, keep him here till we find out the truth of this story he told," Bob ordered. "You stay here, Andy, an' watch him. . . . You girls don't need to bother about him any more."

"How can you say that? Heavens, he might rise up and murder us in our beds," Delsa said.

Her brother looked at her suspiciously, but her face was sweetly innocent.

As Dove Smith lay on the bed, his face white from loss of blood, the girl searched in vain for visible signs of the ruthless character he was said to possess; and, as on previous occasions, she found herself believing somehow in his honesty. When Sibyl suggested that they retire and leave the sheriff to Andy she vetoed the suggestion vigorously, so the three of them sat about the room waiting.

Delsa was the first to notice that the sheriff's eyes were open. They closed almost instantly and she said nothing, though she watched them narrowly. A minute or so later they opened again, cautiously. She knew then that he must have been conscious for some time, and was trying to get his bearings before he attracted attention to himself.

"Are you feeling better?" she asked.

His eyes flew wide open at that; a ghost of a smile softened the harsh lines of his mouth.

"I feel skookum," he responded. "I've been tryin' to figger out just where I was an' how I happen to be here. Got it all straight now. Must have done a high dive out there with no water to land in."

"You fainted."

"I'm shore ashamed of myself, Miss Delmar. I can't remember of ever havin' done such a fool thing before."

"We all have our weaknesses," Delsa grinned. "I did a faint myself last night, and with a lot less cause than you. You've lost a lot of blood, do you know it?"

"I knew I'd lost a boot-full. Has your brother gone?"

"Yes."

"I'm sure sorry I went an' spilled myself all over the landscape. I wanted to go along. If I can have my boots now I reckon I'll try to overtake him."

"Bob's orders were for you to stay here, pardner," Andy Shumway spoke up. His tone was an intimation that he meant to see that the order was obeyed.

"You mustn't move," Delsa said. "If you get that wound to bleeding again, no telling what the consequences will be."

He raised himself on one elbow. His hat and guns lay upon a table at the other side of the room, and his boots were close by. In the lamplight he could see the dark crimson stains on the right boot.

"If you need anything, Mr. Sheriff—" Sibyl suggested.

He lay back with a sigh. "Nothing," he said.

A black mood settled upon him. He foresaw clearly what would happen when Delmar encountered Roll Harkey. The Seven V L foreman would easily persuade the prejudiced ranchman that the case had been the exact reverse of the facts. Nor could he see where he could disprove the charges. Harkey would see to it that all evidence of the bulls having been fed his hay was removed before Delmar got to see the place.

The chain of evidence which he had tried to forge against the criminals would entangle him like the recoil of a taut cable. The seeming proof that he had stolen the Herefords would prove that he had killed Sandy Henderson. That, in turn, would indicate that he had stolen the twenty-two high-power rifle from Cagnell and Sparks.

And, if he had stolen the rifle that would prove their innocence, and it would follow, of course, that he had planted the money stolen from Brimberry's bank on their persons. That would link him with the bank robbery. His friendship with Spike Watson was known to Delsa Delmar, and the linking of Lone Hyde and Red Hall with the cattle rustling would assuredly cause her to think that he had been directly implicated in the bank robbery in spite of the fact that he had been with her that day.

No person who wasn't in possession of the real facts could possibly believe in him. He didn't blame Bob Delmar for his views, and he marveled that Delsa had had as much faith in him as she had displayed. But he was cornered—more damningly and effectually cornered than he had been between the two juniper trees, or backed against the wall in his own jail.

They wouldn't have to ask the governor to remove him from office now. And he would be arrested for the murder of Sandy Henderson. But, desperate as his plight now was, he felt worse on account of the poor creatures at the Sand Creek Ranch than he did for himself. Every one of them had got a rotten deal in the game of life.

He had done his best to give them the chance they deserved, but the law with which they had tried to maintain a truce would be on their heels. They were in the way of becoming decent, hard-working, useful citizens. Now their lives would probably be blasted, and they would become again a menace to society.

There was but one thing to do. He had to get out of there, now. His eyes roamed speculatively to young Andy Shumway. Under ordinary circumstances the puncher wouldn't have caused him much concern. But now the puncher had all the advantage. He was armed, while the sheriff lay flat on his back, with one leg and one arm well-nigh useless, and unarmed. Nor did either of the two women show any inclination to retire.

Suddenly there came a knock at the door. For a moment Andy and the two women looked at each other, then Sibyl arose. "I'll answer it," she said.

Dove was in a bedroom just off the living room and Sibyl had left the door open. They could easily hear what was said.

"Good evenin', Mrs. Delmar. Is your husband home?"

"Not just now," Sibyl replied. "Won't you come in? Bob left here not long ago for the Seven V L."

"S'funny I didn't meet him on the way. I'm from there," the visitor, Parl Whiting, remarked. He stepped inside and stood on the thick, wine-colored carpet, awkwardly fumbling with his hat.

"Won't you sit down?" Sibyl invited pleasantly.

"Don't know's I'd orta stay. You see we found them—them thar gen-

tlemen cows you folks lost, an' Roll sent me over to tell you we was holdin' 'em in the corral."

Delsa's eyes were fastened upon the face of the wounded sheriff. His gray eyes met hers steadily, but neither spoke.

"How did you come to find them?" Sibyl asked softly.

"Caught Dove Smith an' two other fellers tryin' to drive 'em into the Never Named Hills. There was a fight, too, an' Lute Lannard was killed," Whiting reported.

"Well, my husband and his men must be at the Seven V L by this time, but thanks for telling us just the same," Sibyl said in a peculiar tone.

"Then I reckon I'll shack back to the ranch," the puncher said. "Good night."

"Good night," they heard Sibyl say, and then the door closed.

There was a pitifully pleading look upon Delsa's face as she leaned toward the sheriff.

"Well, it looks like you'd tried to pull a fast one—puttin' the blame on the Seven V L boys after you'd got caught with the goods," Andy Shumway said vengefully.

"I told the exact truth," Dove asserted. "I found the cattle where they was bein' guarded by the men who call themselves Duncan an' Frisbie, an' by Lute Lannard an' Mel Davis. The two men from Alex Logan's ranch happened along in time to keep me from bein' killed—after I'd got Frisbie."

His eyes were upon Delsa's face, mutely pleading for belief.

"A fine lot o' weeds, that," Shumway sneered. His voice suddenly became savage. "If you stole them bulls, then you murdered my pal, Sandy Henderson! By Gawd, if you wasn't wounded—"

"You'd what?" Dove challenged evenly.

Delsa interposed hastily. "No matter what's happened, Andy, your job for the present is taking care of this man. That's all."

Just then Sibyl's voice was heard calling for Delsa, and the girl hurried out, closing the partition door behind her. The sheriff realized that it was now or never.

"Listen, hombre," he said coldly, "if I've gotta stay here—an' I can't move—I want my shirt off. I never could rest with my shirt on. This arm is the bunk, an' I can't raise myself to pull it off. Will you gimme a hand?"

Andy Shumway gave him a suspicious glance, but the fact that Dove wanted his shirt off indicated that he meant no resistance. Besides, as anyone could see, he was too weak to move, and he had a crippled leg.

The puncher came over and tried awkwardly to remove the shirt.

"Wait. Just bend over an' let me git my arms around your neck. Then you can lift me easier," Dove murmured. It looked easy and Andy obeyed.

The next moment the puncher was dragged down against the wounded man's chest by a powerful right arm, which still retained much of its strength. At the same instant Dove's left hand shot forward and closed over the handle of the unfortunate puncher's gun. Before Andy could recover from his surprise enough to cry out the muzzle of his own weapon was against his stomach.

"Don't make a sound, hombre, or I'll let you have it," the sheriff hissed viciously. "Straighten up now, an' be soft about it."

Andy Shumway's face was mottled with rage and humiliation, yet he dared take no chances with that gun pointing squarely at his midriff. But the real ordeal for the sheriff was still to come.

"Kick my boots over here," he said, as he swung his legs to the floor. A stab of fiery pain shot up his leg, and for a second he came near to passing out. He knew that he dared

not relax for even a second or Shumway would be upon him like a wildcat.

He had to sit still for a moment; then he grimly reached for his boots. He drew one on, and then he realized that the other would never go on his swollen foot. He looked about the room and discovered an old pair of house slippers, evidently belonging to Bob Delmar. He pointed at them silently, and when Andy passed them over he shoved his foot into one of them.

"My hat," he whispered.

Then came the supreme test. If he couldn't walk he would be out of luck. He tested his weight gingerly, and bit deep into his lip to suppress the pain. He could feel the blood start to gush forth again, but he could walk with a slow, dragging step, putting practically all his weight on the other leg.

He got his gunbelt and strapped it on. Then he motioned Andy to the side door, and a moment later they were outside.

"Gimme your arm to lean on—an' don't try any tricks," he commanded, and thus compelled the puncher to aid him out to the corral.

He leaned against the fence while Andy saddled a pair of horses. When they were mounted he made Andy ride ahead of him for half a mile. Then, knowing that his trail couldn't be followed in the dark, and that the young fellow could do him no damage without a weapon, he ordered him to turn back.

"An' don't stop movin' nor look back till you're well out of sight," he bade.

"I could kill myself fer lettin' this happen," the puncher wept.

"Some day you may be tickled to death that you did let it happen," Dove predicted. "No matter what you believe, I was tellin' the truth. The Seven V L outfit an' Al Brimberry are the real crooks in this country. You give it a good hard think."

Back at the ranch house Delsa was talking desperately to Sibyl to keep her sister-in-law out of the bedroom as long as she could. She had seen the two men pass the window, and knew which one carried the gun.

*(To be continued in the next issue)*

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*TRAIL'S END MEMBERSHIP COUPON*

*I am a regular reader of* RANCH ROMANCES.

*I want to become a member of Trail's End Club.*

*Signed* (*Miss*) (*Mrs.*) (*Mr.*) .....

*Address* .....

Three *successive* coupons make you a member of America's greatest outdoor club.

Ten cents brings you the lovely "Trail's End" pin.

You must be a member to secure the pin.

Please *print* your name and address plainly.

# Some Members of Trail's End Club

*The names of these members appear on page* 542.

Join Trail's End—See page 630.

# our air

*OUR AIR MAIL is running daily between the editorial office of RANCH ROMANCES and its readers throughout the world. The Editor wishes to establish a definite understanding with every reader and be in a position to know what you want and why. RANCH ROMANCES is not published for anyone but the reader, and we want you to look upon this magazine as something distinctly your own. Take a personal interest in its future. Write and tell us exactly the kind of story that you think ought to go into it. And we want to help make friends for our readers. We want to help you to know friends who are thousands of miles away, or within a stone's throw of your own town. OUR AIR MAIL will be glad to forward and exchange letters. The Editor reserves the right to read and turn over to the Postal Authorities, if necessary, anything that is not in keeping with the clean, outdoor spirit of RANCH ROMANCES. Be sure to enclose postage for letters sent by OUR AIR MAIL.*

### DESIRES NEW FRIENDS

*Dear Editor:*

*Please publish this letter in your pen pal department as I desire some new friends.*

*I am a single man, five feet six, weigh one hundred and thirty-five pounds, have brown eyes and hair, and am dark complexioned. I like all kinds of outdoor sports, baseball and hiking in the woods being two of my favorites.*

*I hope to see my letter in print soon and that many will write to me.*

*Sincerely yours,*
*GUY RANKIN.*

*Dayton, Iowa.*

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### AN S. O. S.

*Dear Editor:*

*As a reader of Ranch Romances, I would like to have you send an S. O. S. for me.*

*When work got scarce and I was laid off, I came out here and made my own job. I am a trapper and miner now and getting along great.*

*I want to hear from men and women who have traveled some, also people who like the great open spaces, sports and action.*

*Sincerely,*
*A. L. LAYTON.*

*Pilot Hill,*
*El Dorado Co.,*
*Calif.*

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### FROM THE HILLS OF KENTUCKY

*Dear Editor:*

*I am a constant reader of Ranch Romances and find it one of the best magazines I have ever read. I live in the mountains of old Kentucky and haven't much amusement here. However, the scenery is beautiful and that makes up for a lot of the things I miss.*

*I would like to have lots of pen pals from all over the world. Will exchange snaps. I have dark brown curly hair, blue eyes, and am twenty-five years old.*

*Here's wishing R. R. the best of luck.*

*Yours sincerely,*
*LORA WEST.*

*Blue Diamond, Ky.*

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### CROWD CHARLEY

*Dear Editor:*

*Permit me to inform you that I like Ranch Romances very much.*

*The usual plea, now, and that for pen pals. I have real black curly hair, large brown eyes and a little pug nose. My shipmates tell me that I'm good-looking and I am very popular with them.*

*I want to hear from all, especially the opposite sex and I'll be glad to tell all about the airplanes in my squadron. Crowd me, girls.*

*Sincerely,*
*CHARLES E. McSHANE.*

*V-F-8 Squadron,*
*Naval Air Sta.,*
*Hampton Roads, Va.*

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### TEXAS COWGIRL

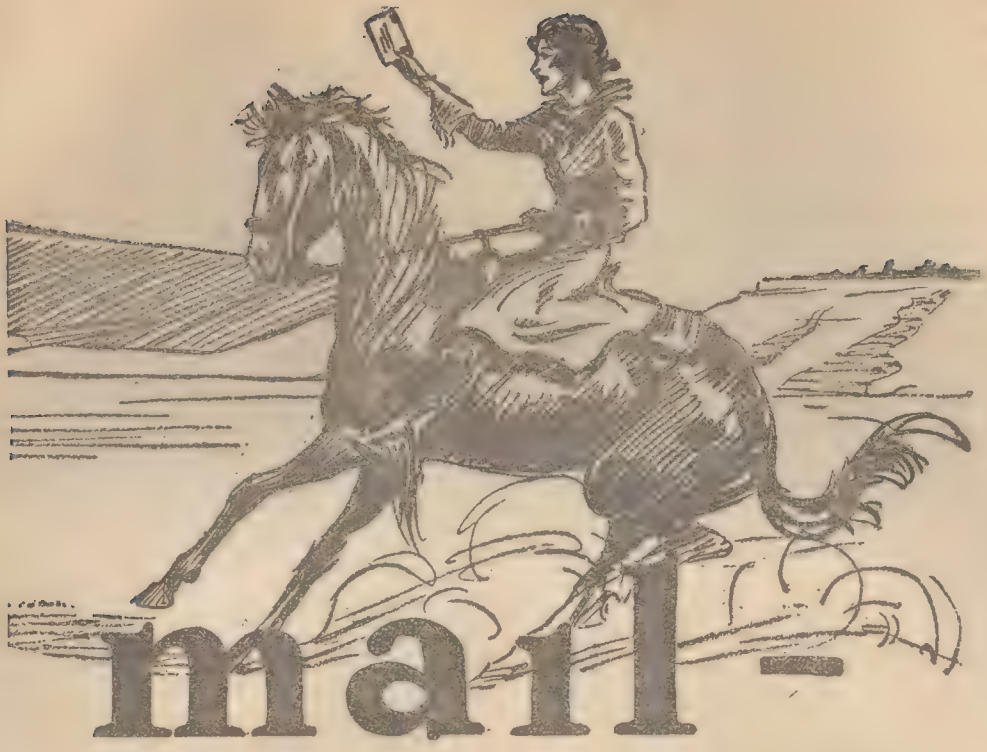
*Dear Editor:*

*How about a cowgirl riding her pony to Our Air Mail with a letter to see in print? I have read Ranch Romances for nearly two years and I think it is the best magazine I have read yet.*

*Outdoor sports are the ones I like best. I play all kinds of ball, like horseback riding, swimming, dancing and hiking. I am eighteen years old, have brown curly hair, gray eyes, and live on a ranch. I also would like to have some members of Trail's End write to me.*

*Yours truly,*
*SKEAT CONNETTE.*

*Box 141,*
*Hereford, Tex.*




### FROM THE WONDER STATE

*Dear Editor:*

*Being a very old reader of R. R. and an enthusiastic booster of this publication, I believe I am entitled to a little corner in Our Air Mail. I want pen pals from everywhere, on land or sea, and anyone under twenty-five will be welcomed royally. I'll tell all you want to know about the beautiful National Park and the dear old Wonder State.*

*I'm still in my 'teens—on the sunny side of twenty, have hair the color of copper and dark brown eyes. Am a lover of music, art, reading and writing, the outdoors, and am a twanger of the guitar.*

*Sailors, readers in foreign lands, Mexico, Canada, everyone, I'm depending on you to supply my needs, for pen pals are a necessity in my case. I'll tell you lots more when you write.*

*GENEVA SAMPLE.*

*Gen. Del.,*
*Hot Springs,*
*Nat'l Park, Ark.*

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### SPEED DEMON

*Dear Editor:*

*I have been a constant reader of your magazine for some years.*

*I am a lonely boy with plenty of time to write, so I wish to enter my plea for a few pen pals from all over the world.*

*I am quite an athlete. I am a choice for all-army end on the Schofield football team and hold the championship for fancy high diving. Please drop me a line, you pen-slingers, and I will give a grass hula skirt to the first five who answer.*

*Here's wishing the R. R. the greatest of success.*

*LONESOME SPEED DEMON.*

*William R. Lever,*
*2nd Bn. Hq. 13th F. A.,*
*Honolulu, T. H.*

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### AN ANSWER FOR ALL

*Dear Editor:*

*I happened to have a R. R. given to me and I certainly did enjoy it. I plan to be a regular reader from now on.*

*I wonder if you would put in my plea for pen pals as I have a hobby for writing letters. My age is twenty, have dark brown hair, gray eyes and would especially like to hear from boys in the U. S. or foreign service. Anyone who cares to write will get an answer.*

*Sincerely,*
*CONSTANCE M. KERR.*

*12 Robert St.,*
*Lee, Mass.*

### BREAKING THE ICE

*Dear Editor:*

*Does a college prof. stand a chance in your pen pal column? I am teaching school here in Washington and get awfully lonesome since leaving the big city, so I am writing this letter for publication in your Air Mail column.*

*I am thirty-six years old, tall, have blond hair and blue eyes. My favorite sports are tennis, golf, swimming, football and baseball. Have organized lots of school teams during the past few years and was considered a star on our college team in former years.*

*I have been an ardent reader of your magazine for a long time, but am just breaking the ice for the first time. I'd like to see more stories like "Ghosts of Flat Head Range."*

*Sincerely,*
*T. K. MUSICK.*

*2302 First St., N. W.,*
*Washington, D. C.*

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### AN ACTING CORPORAL

*Dear Editor:*

*I have been a constant reader of Ranch Romances for the past two years and must say I enjoy every story. I wonder if I could find some pen pals to keep me from getting lonely?*

*I am an acting corporal in a machine gun company and will be glad to answer all questions about the functioning of our weapons. I would like to hear from both girls and boys. I am twenty-one, and light complexioned. Am considered a good horseman and an excellent shot. My hobby is photography, and I promise everybody who writes me some very good scenes of the Panama Canal.*

*E. C. RAINEY.*

*Acting Corporal,*
*Machine Gun Company "M,"*
*14th U. S. Infantry,*
*Fort Davis, Canal Zone.*

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### DON'T BE BASHFUL

*Dear Editor:*

*They say a bad penny always shows up, so I'll be a bad penny. I've been reading R. R. for over three years, and during that time I've tried consistently to have a letter published. I'm still at it, and hope this attempt clicks.*

*Now if anyone is interested in me, I'll tell you about myself. I'm free, white, female, at the romantic age of eighteen, have blue eyes and brown curly hair. Come on, everyone, don't be bashful.*

*"DODO."*

*Doris M. Soden,*
*114 W. Kenilworth Ave.,*
*Villa Park, Ill.*

### EAST PAGING THE WEST

*Dear Editor:*

*I have been reading Ranch Romances for several years and have found it to be the most enjoyable of all magazines. This is my first attempt to get my letter in Our Air Mail and I certainly hope that I succeed.*

*I am an Eastern college boy and would like to hear from Western college and ranch girls, and anyone else who would care to write.*

*I am tall, have brown hair and blue eyes. Am on the swimming team and enjoy skating, golf, tennis and track. My hobbies are photography and electricity. I am twenty years old.*

*Write soon, girls, and please send me your photographs.*

*With thanks to R. R. for affording me so many hours of enjoyment, I remain*

*Yours very truly,*
*WILLIAM SIMPSON, JR.*

*Church Dorm No. 5,*
*15th St.*
*Troy, N. Y.*

### EVELYN IS LONELY

*Dear Editor:*

*How about giving a little girl from the Buckeye State just a little bit of room? Honestly, I find that Ranch Romances is the most interesting magazine I've ever read.*

*Here's a lonesome girl in a big city who craves a great many friends. I'm seventeen years old and petite. Every football season I am the secretary of Cleveland's professional football team and I find it to be a great deal of fun. And do I like football and baseball? I most certainly do. In fact, I am fond of all sports. Music, dancing and traveling are three more of my weaknesses. Time rests heavily on my hands and consequently I can answer all letters I receive.*

*By the way, I'll be especially glad to hear from those aboard the U. S. S. Langley.*

*Here's wishing Ranch Romances lots of luck.*

*Yours fair and square,*
*EVELYN KALAL.*

*12805 Marston Ave.,*
*Cleveland, Ohio.*

### FROM THE SOUTHLAND

*Dear Editor:*

*Having been constant readers of your grand magazine, Ranch Romances, for several years, we sincerely hope that our first attempt to secure pen pals will materialize successfully.*

*Although we are never without something interesting to do, we have a desire to make new acquaintances, both in America and abroad. We promise to answer each letter promptly with interesting accounts of the happenings here in the glorious South.*

*LaVerne is nineteen, cute, and intensely interested in dramatics. Jack is twenty-one, dark hair and eyes, and interested in everything in general.*

*Something special to the first ten who write to us, so get busy, gang, and sling a line down our way.*

*LAVERNE and JACK.*

*LaVerne Van Amber,*
*Jack Carlton,*
*1023 S. Rosemont Ave.,*
*Dallas, Texas.*

### CHEER "DIXIE" UP

*Dear Editor:*

*I have been a constant reader of Ranch Romances and think it's the best magazine published. I would appreciate it very much if you would print my plea for pen pals. I know you have helped many lonesome people find pals through this wonderful magazine and I'm hoping you can do the same for me.*

*I am a young girl of eighteen, have black wavy hair and brown eyes, and like all sports. Would especially like to hear from sailors, soldiers, marines, cowboys and everyone else who wants a true pen pal. Will exchange snapshots with anyone wishing to.*

*Come on, all you ink-slingers, and relieve my loneliness.*

*Sincerely,*
*"DIXIE."*

*Miss Dolores Williams,*
*Gen Del., City Hall Sta.,*
*New York, N. Y.*

### "MODERN KNIGHT OF THE ROAD"

*Dear Editor:*

*I'm an ever faithful reader of the Double R. Will you please publish my plea for pen pals?*

*I am twenty-one years old, stand six feet toward heaven, have brown eyes and dark brown wavy hair. In the last year of this so-called depression I have traveled through at least twenty of our forty-eight states in my quest for adventure. Will gladly reveal all the highlights of my experiences as a "Modern knight of the road."*

*I have plenty of time, ink, paper and patience to write my tales. So come on, everyone, drop me a line and let's become acquainted.*

*Yours truly,*
*GEORGE H. LINN.*

*15919 Huntsmere Ave.,*
*Cleveland, Ohio.*

*P. S.—I'd especially like to hear from Hawaii and genuine cowgirls—if there are any!*

### SHE WRITES POETRY

*Dear Editor:*

*I am just wondering if there is a tiny space for old folks in your magazine. I enjoy your stories very much and thought, perhaps I might find one among the vast army of your readers who is lonely like myself. I am a widow, have dark brown hair and eyes, am a lover of books, music, theaters, and the finer things of life. My chief hobby is writing poetry.*

*I would like to hear from someone between the ages of thirty-five and forty-five; those who are lonely and seeking a true friend. I would especially like to hear from someone in Canada.*

*Somehow life has lost all its sweetness,*
*All the beauty of living is gone,*
*I find no warmth in the sunshine—*
*No splendor in the dawn.*
*The flowers have lost their fragrance,*
*The song-birds are hushed in the dell;*
*Somehow my heart is all achy,*
*All because—I'm nobody's pal.*

*I will send the rest of this poem to the first three who answer my plea.*

*SOMEBODY'S PAL.*

*Mrs. I. J. J.,*
*R. R. 2, Box 333,*
*Oklahoma City, Okla.*

### A VERSATILE LADY

*Dear Editor:*

*My first copy of Ranch Romances, and have I been missing something! Still, I hope I'm not too late to enter my plea for pen pals. I'm twenty-one, slim, have chestnut-brown curly hair with reddish tints, blue-green eyes, and a fair complexion.*

*I take an interest in everything, everywhere. Love music, can play a few instruments, among them the Hawaiian and Spanish guitars. Like to dance, sing, and have a good time. Am a free-lance writer, enjoy reading, sports of all kinds, and am a bit of an artist. Like to write letters and receive them.*

*So get out your pens, you readers of Ranch Romances; I'll be ready for you.*

*Sincerely,*
*ETHEL MARJORIE OLSON.*

*Woodlawn Sta.,*
*Buffalo, N. Y.*

### A NEW ENGLANDER

*Dear Editor:*

*Is it possible for a New Englander to find pen pals through this wonderful agency of yours?*

*It was a great day for me when I discovered Ranch Romances. The story, "Avispa Valley War," by James W. Routh, was fine, also the serial, "Ghost Town," by Marie de Nervaud. I am striving to become an author myself and I fully appreciate a good story when I see one, and there are plenty in R. R.*

*I would like to receive letters from any part of this earth, so please write to me of your communities and of yourselves. I am nearly thirty, have blue eyes, light brown wavy hair and my hobbies are reading, writing and the outdoors.*

*Wishing all the success possible to Ranch Romances, I am*

*Sincerely yours,*
*C. RAYMOND CARTER.*

*R. F. D. 2, Box 70,*
*Hudson, N. H.*

### A WELCOME FOR ALL

*Dear Editor:*

*Now listen! Here's little me, in person, just begging for pen pals. I have brown hair and eyes, a dimple, a sweet disposition, a quick temper, and will be sweet sixteen in June. I'll answer all letters and exchange photos. So enclose one in your first letter, will you, pals?*

*I should especially like to hear from Roger Howard, the Speed Demon—I like the idea of a dimple in your chin; Herman Brosius, Viv and Steve, Gordon Alcok and Robert Willoughby, "Scotty" Cross—remember your guarantee; Frank Kosinsky, Ruth Price, George Miller,*

*Charles Wallington and Thomas Powers; "Happy" McPool—will you make me happy, too? I'm half Irish; Don Anaitin, Dick Hankey and Earle Maixmer.*

*The above pals and everyone else will find "welcome" on my doormat, and I promise to sue all those who do not write.*

*Last, but not least—best wishes to Ranch Romances. It's swell!*

*Hoping,*
*PEGGY THOMPSON.*

*2004 Chicago Ave.,*
*Richmond, Va.*

---

### SAY IT WITH INK

*Dear Editor:*

*I have picked up different Ranch Romances and have now become a constant reader. I enjoy the stories very much, and my pal enjoys them with me.*

*We are two nurses working night duty and we have much time to write and read. Reading grows monotonous, so we have decided to write. My pal is twenty-seven years of age, a blonde and very good-natured. I am twenty-one, have chestnut-brown wavy hair. Our motto, like that of many others, is "Say it with ink." Won't every reader drop us a line, from Maine to California?*

*With luck to Ranch Romances, we are*
*THE PENNSYLVANIANS.*

*Eva Knight, Box 26,*
*Mildred Munson, Box 135,*
*Woodville, Penn.*

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### A KANSAS FAN

*Dear Editor:*

*I have been a constant reader of Ranch Romances for about five years, and the only time I ever missed a few issues was when I was on a job in Arizona, fifty miles from a railroad. I think it is a wonderful magazine and like the stories very much, with the exception of the serials. Somehow I never have liked serials, but you can't please everyone in every respect, and since there are many who do like serials, it's okay with me.*

*I'm a Swedish-American, thirty-eight years old, lonely, and would like to have some pen pals. I'll answer every letter that is written legibly and plainly addressed, if I have to hire someone to help write replies.*

*I would especially like to hear from men and women who have traveled some, and who are interested in prospecting and homesteading.*

*Sincerely,*
*"Doc."*

*John S. Holmquist,*
*1109 West 11th St.,*
*Coffeyville, Kans.*

---

### ARE YOU SYLVIA'S IDEAL?

*Dear Editor:*

*I have read your magazine since the spring of '32, and haven't missed a single issue. The stories are great, and I especially liked the story by Mr. Hough, "Ghosts of Flat Head Range." It sure was exciting!*

*I have followed the letters in Our Air Mail and have replied to some, but, so far, no luck. All my letters to you have met the sad fate of being thrown in the waste-basket, but will try once more.*

*I am a girl of twenty summers, brunette, have blue eyes, am full of pep, very fond of dancing, skating and all vigorous outdoor sports. Would like to hear from cowboys, artists and aviators, especially. I'm looking particularly for someone tall, slim, brunette and full of jolly good fun, between the ages of twenty-one and thirty.*

*Sincerely,*
*SYLVIA PETERS.*

*2112 Kenwood Parkway,*
*Minneapolis, Minn.*

*P. S.—If Jimmy Bird sees this, I would like to hear from him.*

---

### HAS MUCH TO WRITE ABOUT

*Dear Editor:*

*For several years I have been a constant reader of Ranch Romances and think it is a great magazine to while away the long evenings.*

*I would like to have some pen pals write to me from all over the United States. I'm interested in all outdoor sports, and as I live in Southern California, can always find lots to write about to those who answer my letter.*

*I am a nurse and my work takes me to different places, sometimes to the more isolated spots where one gets rather lonesome. Would like to hear from men and women in their thirties.*

*Sincerely,*
*L. RAY WILLIAMS.*

*Box 81,*
*Pine Valley, Calif.*

### NATIVE OF MONTANA

*Dear Editor:*

*This is my third attempt to break into Our Air Mail in the last two years. I have read the letters in each issue of Ranch Romances, but have never seen mine. I would appreciate very much having this letter published, as I am in urgent need of a few pen pals.*

*I will answer all letters received and am willing to exchange snaps, if you will be kind enough to write a few lines to me. I am twenty-nine years of age, considered a fairly good dancer and skater. I was born and raised on a ranch in Montana and am very lonesome here in California. I am tall, have medium complexion, dark blue eyes and curly hair.*

*Thanking you, I am*
*Sincerely,*
*"MIKE."*

*Mike A. Kalaniok,*
*315 W. 60th St.,*
*Los Angeles, Calif.*

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### LONELY DANISH READER

*Dear Editor:*

*Have just finished reading a copy of Ranch Romances and will say it really lives up to its name. Your stories are always vivid, interesting and clean.*

*And now a plea for pen pals. Is there anyone who wants to write to a very lonely and homely looking boy? I am a Dane by birth, have been in a few foreign countries, and landed in Canada three years ago. Here is something of a description of the undersigned: I am tall, have blond hair and blue-gray eyes and am twenty-four years old.*

*Now everybody write a letter to me, please, and I will promise to answer everyone.*

*Wishing your magazines and Ranch Romances, in particular, lots of success, I remain*
*Very sincerely yours,*
*SWEN CLAUSEN.*

*Cowansville,*
*Quebec, Canada.*

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### DISTANT LAND CALLING

*Dear Editor:*

*I have been reading Ranch Romances for some time now and find it one of the best. It is not sold here and I have it sent out to me.*

*As this is a very quiet place, I would like someone to correspond with me, from the ages of twenty-eight to thirty-eight. Will exchange views or photographs.*

*Hope you find room for these few words.*
*Yours faithfully,*
*F. TOWNSEN.*

*No. 14 Company, R. A. S. C.,*
*Talavera Barracks,*
*Jerusalem, Palestine.*

---

### INK-SLINGING EXPERTS

*Dear Editor:*

*We are two soldiers who have been trying for some time to have a letter published in Ranch Romances. We enjoy reading R. R. and have about seven miles to walk to get it. However, with such good stories, the reward is well worth the walk to town.*

*As for descriptions, Eddie is twenty-three, has dark hair and eyes, and likes all sports. Jim is twenty-one, has green eyes, light hair and doesn't like backgammon.*

*We are radio operators for Uncle Sam here in Arizona and are near the Border. We will do our best to answer all letters and tell about the wild and woolly West as it is here in the Southwest.*

*Everyone from fifteen to thirty, drop us a letter and see some real ink-slinging, done by experts in the line. And we are not blushing when we say that.*

*Sincerely,*
*JAMES E. HERRON,*
*EDDIE RANDLE.*

*P. O. Box 1472,*
*Yuma, Ariz.*

---

### AN AMATEUR ENTERTAINER

*Dear Editor:*

*I have not missed an issue of Ranch Romances in two years and would like to have a lot of pen pals who are also readers of your magazine.*

*I am an amateur entertainer, being a tap dancer and comedian. Have brown hair and eyes and a jolly disposition. I also like to read and write. Can promise long, interesting letters to those who write.*

*Sincerely,*
*EDWARD HUGHES.*

*960 Manton St.,*
*Pittsburgh, Penn.*

# The Wandering Cowboy

I AM a wandering cowboy,
From ranch to ranch I roam;
At every ranch when welcome,
I make myself at home.
Two years I worked for the Double L,
And one for the O Bar O;
Then drifted West from Texas,
To the plains of Mexico.

*Chorus:* Heigho!

There I met up with a rancher
Who was looking for a hand;
So when springtime greened the valleys,
I was burning the Bar S brand.
I worked on through the summer;
Then early in the fall,
Over the distant ranges,
There came the old, old call.

*Chorus:* Heigho!

So I drifted to Arizona,
To work for Uncle Bob,
A-tailing up the weak ones
On a winter feeding job.
But the ranch camp grew too lonely,
With never rest or change;
So I saddled up one morning
And struck for a distant range.

*Chorus:* Heigho!

One night in wild Wyoming,
When the stars hung bright and low,
I lay in my tarp a-dreaming
Of the far-off home rancho,
Where the cottonwood leaves are whispering,
In the evening soft and low,
'Tis there my heart's a-turning,
And homeward I must go.

*Chorus:* Heigho!

It is now I'm tired of rambling.
No longer will I roam
When my pony I've unsaddled
In the old corral at home.
I've been a wandering cowboy;
From ranch to ranch did I roam,
But now my pony's grazin'
At the rancho I call home.

*Chorus:* Heigho!

---

*Let us know what your favorite Western song is, amigos, and we'll endeavor to publish it for you.*

# WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

BY PROFESSOR MARCUS MARI

## TAURUS

### APRIL

TAURUS governs after April twentieth. These people are strong, capable, unyielding and gifted with fine executive ability. They have splendid memories and are noted for exactness and persistency in their work.

They are affable when not irritated, and very generous; but prefer giving money to making any sacrifice of time or personal comfort. They are slow to anger, but, when aroused, their tempers are violent. When angry, they say the first thing which comes to mind, regardless of how unjust or unkind it may be.

Though they are often thought fickle because of their changeability of mood, they always prove loyal and generous when their friendship is put to the test.

They are essentially practical and give careful consideration to ways and means of achieving the ends they desire. When they once decide how they are going to accomplish a project, they rarely fail to carry it to a successful finish. It is Taurus people who are fitted to carry out the plans of Aries people, because they possess the ability to put theory into practice.

It is under the sign of Scorpio that those born under Taurus should seek mates and friends.

Professor Marcus Mari will give a personal reading to any reader who sends in the coupon.

Name..... Sex.....

Address.....

Exact date of birth: Year.....Month.....Date.....

Always use this coupon and enclose stamped envelope. 4-21-33

## DEAFNESS IS MISERY

Many people with defective hearing and Head Noises enjoy conversation, go to Theatre and Church because they use Leonard Invisible Ear Drums which resemble Tiny Megaphones fitting in the Ear entirely out of sight. No wires, batteries or head piece. They are inexpensive. Write for booklet and sworn statement of the inventor who was himself deaf.

**A. O. LEONARD, Inc., Suite 683, 70 5th Ave., New York**

## MONEY FOR YOU AT HOME

YOU can earn good money in spare time at home making display cards. No selling or canvassing. We instruct you, furnish complete outfit and supply you with work. Write to-day for free booklet.
The MENHENITT COMPANY, Limited
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**CASH FOR OLD STAMPS.** I pay cash for old U. S. and Confederate stamps and envelopes used before 1880. Also collections of foreign stamps used before 1890. $1 to $10 each for Civil War envelopes with pictures of flags, soldiers, mottoes, on them. Information 10c.
F. STEIN, Dept. U, 7360 N. Seeley Ave., Chicago, Ill.

*Have You Seen*

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Why worry about strikes, layoffs, hard times? Train now for a Government job in the future! Interesting, steady work, travel, good pay. Open to men 18 to 50. Let me help you become a Railway Postal Clerk, Post Office Clerk, City Mail Carrier, Rural Mail Carrier or Customs Inspector. I prepare you at your own home, in your spare time. I was a Secretary Examiner of Civil Service Commission for 8 years. Have helped thousands.

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Please send me, without obligation, your free book "How to Secure a Government Position."
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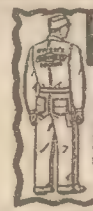
Address .....

# Old at 40?

## Beware Kidney Acidity

Thousands past 40, and many far younger, suffering and losing energy from Getting Up Nights, Backache, Stiffness, Leg Pains, Nervousness, Acidity or Burning, caused by poorly functioning Kidneys or Bladder, should use Cystex (pronounced Sisstex) specially prepared for these troubles. Works fast, circulating through system in 15 minutes. Only 75c at druggists. Guaranteed to fix you up or money back on return of empty package.



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No experience needed to get an our representative for Master work garments. Every business concern a prospect. Advertising embroidered on garment is a big sales feature. Easy pleasant work. You receive pay daily in big cash commissions. You can easily add up to $48.00 weekly to your regular income. We supply everything needed entirely FREE. Write
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# PATENTS

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TIME COUNTS IN APPLYING for patents. Send sketch or model for instructions or write for free book, "How to Obtain a Patent" and "Record of Invention" form. No charge for information on how to proceed. CLARENCE A. O'BRIEN, Registered Patent Attorney, 187-C Adams Building, Washington, D. C.

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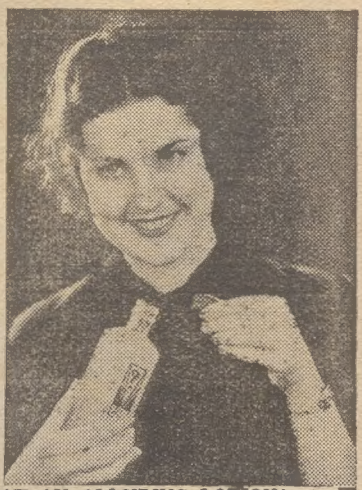
# Win $3500.00

## or Auburn "12" Sedan and $2,000.00 Extra

I will give $3,500.00 to some deserving man or woman, $1,000.00 to another, $500.00 to a third—225 Grand Prizes all at one time—and thousands of Special Rewards. Sounds too good to be true, but it is true. I am giving away such fortunes in one of the most gigantic advertising campaigns you ever heard of. Everyone who takes an active part will be rewarded in cash. So qualify for this opportunity by sending me a name for my wonderful Skin Lotion.



WHAT AN ALLURING LOTION!

It softens the skin, causing it to retain the attractive, satiny velvety texture. Protects against exposure to heat, wind, rain, sun, and cold. Keeps the skin firm, soft and delightful to touch. Delicately scented. Truly a marvelous Skin Lotion. Suggest a name. Do it today. Win the $250.00 Cash Prize. Send your suggestion on the coupon below or on a one-cent postal card.

## Name this Skin Lotion

### I WILL PAY $250.00 JUST FOR A NAME

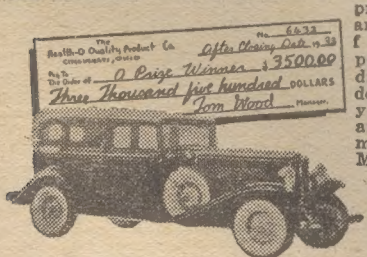
What a wonderful satiny Skin Lotion! Everybody is wild about it. But it has no name. What shall we name it? What do you suggest? I will pay $250.00 to the person sending the name we will use in advertising this Lotion. Nothing fancy is needed. Any simple, easy name may win — either one, two or three words—like "Perfection-Bloom of Youth," "Perfect Skin," or "All-Weather Lotion." The name that flashes through your mind right now may be the winning one.

### It's Easy—Costs Nothing to Win

You can't lose—nothing to buy—nothing to sell to win this big $250.00 Cash Prize. It's easy to send a name. It doesn't have to be a fancy name, or a big-sounding name—just a simple, easy name. Hazel Hinesley, Logansport, Ind., sent the name "Fem-a-lure" for our Beauty Cream and won $150.00. Now I will pay $250.00 merely for a name for our satiny Skin Lotion. Just sending a name — any name—also qualifies you for the opportunity to win $3,500.00.

### Be Prompt! I Will Send You $1,000 Cash Certificate at Once!

Everyone suggesting a name will be qualified for opportunity to win $3,500.00 Cash Prize or Auburn "12" Sedan and $2,000.00 Extra. Think what $3,500.00 would mean to you! Your worries gone — Your dreams come true. All the joy and happiness you have been longing for, may now be yours. One Thousand Dollars EXTRA if you are prompt and win first prize in final distribution. So don't delay. Write your answer and rush it to me. SEND NO MONEY. BE PROMPT. I will send you $1,000.00 Cash Certificate AT ONCE!




**TOM WOOD, Manager**
**Dept. AL-81-D, H-O Bldg., Cincinnati, O.**

### Nothing to Buy or Sell for this $250.00 PRIZE

Just send a name on the Coupon Below

**SIMPLE, EASY RULES**

Only one answer accepted from a family. You must be over 16 years of age and reside within the United States (territories excluded). The answer must be postmarked not later than May 20, 1933. $250.00 will be paid for the name the judges select as most suitable for this Skin Lotion. Penmanship and neatness in writing not considered. Duplicate prizes given in case of ties. All name suggestions become exclusive property of TOM WOOD, Manager.

### YOUR PRIZE COUPON

TOM WOOD, Manager,
H-O Bldg., Dept. AL-81-D, Cincinnati, Ohio.
Here's my suggestion for a name for the Skin Lotion. Name suggested .....

My Name Is.....

Address .....

Town..... State.....

Date I read this offer.....

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*A Challenge to Cash or Credit Jewelers Everywhere*

As "America's Largest Mail Order Credit Jewelers" we bring to you here some of the most sensational values ever offered. New low prices and liberal credit terms make it easy for anyone to own a genuine diamond or a fine watch. Our tremendous buying power, direct diamond importations and direct sales methods defy local cash or credit competition anywhere. Buy the "Royal" way and save.

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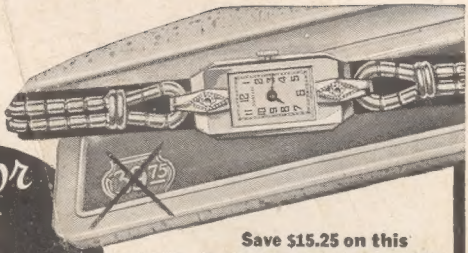
We offer you credit without the slightest embarrassment,—no red tape—no delay, no interest, no extra charges. Simply send $1.00 and your name and address. We ship prepaid on **10 Days Free Trial. No C. O. D. to pay upon arrival.** After full examination and free trial, pay balance in 10 equal monthly payments.

**Written Guarantee Bond**

accompanies every diamond and watch purchased. From start to finish your satisfaction is assured. Order early.

**Sent for $1**

**10 MONTHS TO PAY**



**Save $15.25 on this**
**$24.50 2-DIAMOND BAGUETTE only $2.35 a month**

**GN-11** . . . Here's value which challenges all comparison! Latest style Baguette wrist watch. Slender, dainty, white lifetime case set with **2 sparkling, Genuine Diamonds.** Guaranteed dependable movement. Newest style, bracelet to match. Complete in handsome gift case. Formerly $39.75. *Sale Price Only* $24.50—$2.35 *a month.*

**$16.95**

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***It's a Beauty!***
**5 DIAMOND LADIES' RING**
**Only $2.65 a month**

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**A Most Precious Gift!**
**9-Diamond Wedding Ring**
**Only $1.88 a month**

**GN-5** . . . Exquisite, newest style wedding ring set with 9 fiery, genuine diamonds. Beautifully hand-engraved and daintily milgrained 18-K Solid White Gold mounting. *Sale Price Only* $19.85—$1.88 *a month.*

**$42.50**

**9 DIAMOND ENGAGEMENT RING**
**Only 4.15 a Month**

**GN-17** . . . Hand engraved and daintily milgrained, prong effect mounting of 18-K Solid White Gold. Set with a large, brilliant, genuine blue-white center diamond and eight (8) expertly matched genuine diamonds are set on each Baguette effect sides. **Made to sell for $67.50.** *Sale Price Only* $42.50. $4.15 *a month.*

**FREE! Send for latest catalogue**

Illustrates hundreds of special values in genuine, blue-white diamonds; Bulova, Benrus, Elgin, Waltham, Hamilton, Hayward, Illinois Watches, and other standard makes from $12.50 and upward; special bargains in modern jewelry, silverware and cameras. Send for your copy today.

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If you can duplicate our values anywhere send back your purchase and we'll return your dollar.

**$17.50**

**Only $1.65 a month**

**GN-16** . . . Beautifully engraved, ultra-modern case fitted with a fully guaranteed movement. Open link bracelet to match. One of our greatest values! *Sale Price Only* $17.50—$1.65 *a month.*

**$37.50 BULOVA AT A NEW LOW PRICE**

**$29.75**

**GN-14** . . . Guaranteed dependable, 15-jewel **Bulova,** precision movement, Radium hands and dial. Handsomely engraved, "**Bulova quality**" case. Patented "dust-tite" seal. Engraved bracelet to match. Another amazing Royal value—This watch was originally presented as the **Bulova** "Lone Eagle" at $37.50; *Now* $29.75. *Only* $2.87 *a Month.*

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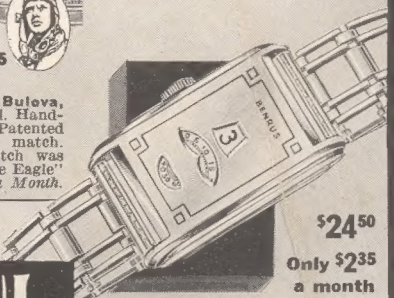
**An ELGIN! Man—What a Watch!**

**Only $1.59 a month**

**GN-6** . . . Nationally famous, Elgin wrist watch, regularly $22.50. Now offered for only $16.95. Handsomely engraved, lifetime, new style chromium finish case. Absolutely dependable and fully guaranteed.—$1.59 *a month.*

**Residents of Greater New York are invited to call in person at our salesrooms.**




**$24.50**

**Only $2.35 a month**

**New BENRUS "Jump-Watch"**

**GN-15** . . . First great watch improvement in 70 years! Face is metal; no more broken crystals—no more bent hands. Dials show hour, minute and second at a glance. Reads like a Speedometer. Dust-proof and jar-proof. Guaranteed accurate, BENRUS movement. Modern, lifetime case. Bracelet to match. *Special Price Only* $24.50—$2.35 *a month.*

# ROYAL DIAMOND & WATCH CO. INC.

ADDRESS DEPT. 43-S
170 BROADWAY, NEW YORK
ESTABLISHED 1895

# GIRL DISAPPEARS IN THIN AIR

**ILLUSION:** Oriental girl reclines on a sheet of plate glass supported by two slaves. Magician waves white sheet...pronounces few magic words ...Presto! She has *disappeared* in thin air.

**EXPLANATION:** One of the "slaves" is a *hollow dummy*. When the magician holds up the sheet the lithe little lady disappears completely—into his empty figure.

Copyright, 1933, R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company

## IT'S FUN TO BE FOOLED ...IT'S MORE FUN TO KNOW

Here's a time-honored trick used in cigarette advertising. It is called "Coolness".

**EXPLANATION:** Coolness is determined by the speed of burning. *Fresh* cigarettes burn more slowly... smoke cooler. *Dried out* cigarettes taste *hot*. Camels are cooler because they come in the famous Humidor Pack of seamless 3-ply, Moisture-Proof cellophane... and because they contain *better tobaccos*.

*It is a fact, well known by leaf tobacco experts, that Camels are made from finer, more expensive tobaccos than any other popular brand.*

Smoke Camels...let your taste sense the difference.

*No Tricks — just Costlier Tobaccos*

IN A MATCHLESS BLEND

SCAN COURTSEY OF
EXCITER